donovan reyes

apocrypha

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“To escape from hell, first you must bury yourself in it.”

— Jean Genet

volta

(for Baudelaire)

the days go by screaming like madmen with axes,
cockroaches pinned pirouetting feeble legs overturned;
life opens languorous lids, smacks tired lips,
breathes sweet sorrow like ashes from an urn.

the oracular spark has come and gone—already
the albatross hangs about like some former lover,
some millstone waiting to sink witches into the
drowning depths, drowsy fingers dowsing wands,

searching for some final dissolution, the end of the night,
but I will go out howling and scratching like a thousand Ornettes
on their tinsel horns spurning the cheap whores that life provides
of the dollar and of the girl and of the white-picket fence.

my brain bathes in liquor as ascetics boil in cold baths,
our skulls chattering in mysticism, babbling tongues,
thinking of the immortality of the soul, exiles
of a world vastly indifferent to us.

during those flaneurial nights scorched by hot neon,
chasing the cold affections of a lover scorned,
bleeding from briar-stitched blanket's crown of thorns,
interred underneath Andalusian moon's sick dawn,

I listened to the mad ramblings of the defrocked monk,
yet cannot help but to think I've forsaken my master:
the April ninth tomb, his cerement womb, a cradle of alabaster
(though to his commandment I've stayed dutifully drunk);

so I light a candle in the wombs of decaying cathedrals, letting
rosary beads drip down the pallid hymn of dusk, interceding
that my father (who art damned, by his own admission), be seeing
divine visions in closed lids; Our Father's mercy abetting.

Prometheus

prescription sunglasses hide hungover madness
raging behind cruel, thin shades; I am God's
loneliest jester, and these bells shake and quiver
their harsh laughter.

I am the synthesis of fathers Apollo and Dionysus,
dancing my oracular inebriation throughout this
blood-drenched, concrete-sunk suburbia pastoral,
dripping strange prophecy

as our consensual hallucination brings us
where it needs to be—grand miasma
of the titan corpse-rotten America,
land of televised bacchanal,

strutting and fretting on Nero's stained stage,
enslaved in golden chains, caught within
the reflection of bedlam's foolish mimesis,
facing a faceless dawn, choking on fluorescence;

cruising ethereal the Promethean fire,
our divine transgressions and eternal depressions
of flesh, metal, and machinated pyre.

Don Juan in a Burger King at 11:49 on a Friday night

basking in the dull corporate glow he coaxes one dead flame
from a blackened match-head,
the miserly spark snuffed as quickly as struck—

the cigarette stays unlit, shifting slightly, soggy in his mouth
like a wound, faint perspiration dappled about dry lips,
pallbearen skin.

road thirsts for headlights, though a lone streetlamp remains flickering—
fleeting moths thumping paper wings against an electric flambeaux.
Charon, pulling over in his used minivan, departs driftingly.

the shades float, bristle, and flicker, never once to be touched, as
once more he holds out his cigarette, perhaps asking for forgiveness
or a light, neither of which come—here exists the dimmest place.

sweating a little, glancing beside himself, he observes his reflection in the
window, quixotically flicking a lighter—an automatic action of thumb
and forefinger—desperately searching for a picture of Dorian Grey;

the black drains from his hair.

american supreme

floating in backyard pools like an exquisite corpse, flotsam flesh
beautiful in the face of pure death, drifting through this grand
chlorinated tomb like some small-town Styx haunted by the
industrial crucifixions of telephone poles, gas stations, H.O.A.s;

a motel that shudders *NO VACANCY* like some neon-gnostic vision;
a *danse macabre* of junked cars and empty dive bars in slow rust;
an inevitable darkness brimming with such rare melancholy deserted,
within the cardboard moonlight street-lamps leaking lonesome an

amber glow against melting asphalt, dub-sentinels of the American night,
as residing somewhere in a nowhere possibility of immaculate deadness
lies the undying flicker of an inevitable desire, a gasoline-quenched pyre,
visceral vacuity of residual suburbs—every glance and sigh some signifier

for something deep-seated and straining, quills burrowing yet deeper still
into quiet desperation, silent stares, the torturous longing for something
more than fluorescents burning like convenience store death-rays,
swelling shimmering symphonic through their sickly viridescent flare

as our immolating passion soon takes on that most apocalyptic desire,
the stitchings of all things falling apart like some cheap suit,
this slow unraveling of still-life like some somber ballet pressing
shattered glass: an orchestra on the eve of its self-destruction.

good morning, captain

suburbia is a devouring mother,
her blackened branches witches'
hands of glory, stretched out
against an extinguishing sky:

our only refuge in the basements of strangers.

part of me died there some time ago,
laying my head against the shoulder
of an older crush, whose memory has faded

like a photograph melting into ash, the flicker
like a one-time wink.

the time is not out of joint; I am out of time,
and that is either the hands of the clock
piercing my side like the lance in Christ's
or the numbers falling flush off its face,

that I am a Xerox smudge in a zine never published,
or the gumshoe in a non-existent noir,

that my life is like a small town of drifters and ex-pats
where you never see the same person twice.

not even yourself.

laudanum

slow-dancing in these dead streets alone,
the starry-eyed sky droops and bends
towards me like the necks of hanged men;
a decadent asceticism, this night

that pours forth such exquisite loneliness,
aged vintage these cosmic libations for the
thousand artistic martyrdoms endured and given,

suffering flashes of an intensifying impulse to
explode brilliantly into technicolor brilliance,
spiraling into swallowing sea from searing sun—
the corpse of Phaeton mourned just as well

as any who have given life to their madness,
their brilliance, their sweet sickness of art,
their lips purified by burning coal yet blistered
beyond all blessings—deathly silent evermore.

the headlights divining darkly sing this song, as do
the houses drained of life, of light, mere monoliths
for the living denied the dignity of becoming a proper
burial ground for these dead souls their inhabitants.

I whistle to myself that same tune, in key with the
grand, devastating silence of the disappearing world,
slowly becoming harder to understand, to live, to die, and so
I walk until the daylight, like King Hamlet's specter

waiting duly
to be dissipated
by the coming dawn,

as always,
to be nothing
once
more.

blackout

purplish apocalypse simmers sunburnt crimson skies
blasting slow-dying night, the angel's plucked eye
illumines desert stretches of asphalt in complete yearn,
slurring like a tarred, drunken moth this highway *détourned*

like some holy-of-holies interred within interminable light,
luminous windowpanes flare neon arabesques so slight:
a presence monolithic and grave—pallbearer of countryside decay,
stoic sentinel watching rotted pastures in shambling array.

headlights waxing and waning in drawling moonlit darkness,
sprawling in the divine madness of rambling hillsides ominous,
scrying similar in rusted rain-puddles drowning stillborn sight,
defying auguries of bled beer cans, burnt cigarette stubs alight.

our destinies intersect and intertwine deftly stitched
and sutured by slumming Moirai swiftly wished
in dead dive bars and decrepit movie-palaces,
unspooling grindhouse tapestries of life's grievous imbalances.

season of the witch

moon-drunk and gutter-bound,
I am pinned like a dying moth
against the dead earth
by that silver sliver,

gambling for inspiration
on my last desperate dollar,
hustling deserted poker tables
in desert-monastic Vegas;

just another john of the Muse,
an elegy and a tease,
pouring forth my libations
against her passionless altar,

slicing stone's arteries
to ink one last page,
wringing all the cairns
tomb-dry for their secrets.

if the critics had any mercy
they'd tear me to shreds
like the Furies,

their blood-wept axes
thirsting my neck,
their torches flaming
and at-the-ready:

I am patient and willing
to be burnt at the stake.

(sweep up my ashes when you're done;
my coffee tastes like someone
used the filter as their
urn.)

goodbye

sun bleeds burning rays against bubbling black coffee Americana
illuming dead greens and pink flamingos
w/ old-make-and-model
cars sputtering morning commute,
cheap paint melting off in languid heat
faint whiff of burnt gasoline lingers loose in singed summer air
lawns mowed by middle-aged men or their sons
while
wives peer through dusty kitchen
windows
making breakfast and glancing at
an unfolding suburban triptych:

stray golf balls peppering unweeded yards;

drifters searching lone streets in hotheaded wisps of smoke;

television ghosts flickering into real life with the snap of a dial;

everything seems beatific, base, in the harsh light.

//

find my body swinging from

the greatest oak
the largest tree
the loneliest house

like a censer in the act of benediction—

that
shall be
my final poem.

the most I can give to the world is my corpse.

L@zarv5

stone-dead swallowed within velvet ashen mires,
chiaroscuro the enduring eros of antediluvian pyres,
PCB boards glimmering brilliantly in jagged shards,
an incandescence alight, lined with shattered bulbs.

through the melted mind of a neuromancer's pink thunderbolt
magik, the electronic tomb-chill shaken his very pith,
of rusted generator graveyards sputtering neon monolith—
some druidic Pop Art, a tenebrism of dead tires,

Cassandra searches and nurses her madness surrounding,
shimmering, bleeding fields of oil shining viscous dark,
vermilion sunset replication glowering gorgeously, piercing sharp
in cathedral-like alienation, baroque the brooding metal-scrap

buried within such rich gluttony of sand, a pharaoh's surfeit,
drowning out the harsh rattle of the analog dead,
whose LEDs blink and flutter like evil omens half-sunken,
lain forgotten, clutching cold their cruel circuitry to bitter end.

their chrome cannot help but to be dappled in the evening redness,
nor swell with sunlight like the bellies of dead crows in savage dawn:
these slumbering beasts of wire-sutured flesh and hot-soldered skin.

industrial prayer

(*for Ginsberg*)

Shall we burn like angels in gasoline gutters? We'll both be yearning
For complete collapse, true oblivion—the void cages us like rabid beasts, though these streets moan our sweet song: corpses of factories rusting harmonic, clanging fierce their death-rattle, sputtering oil from industrial wounds.

I have seen men burn dollars like incense, wild and intoxicated from the fumes, and
I have seen men burn hells in half-lid eyes, cattle to slaughter to burial, and
I have seventy euros in my pocket, dreams of lusty Madrid, to lay my lips where the bullet spilt the blood of García Lorca

I am loveless and lost in these American streets, this American darkness that flickers like a cold flame with its promises of American love and lust, on the billboards and in the clubs,

the cheap rooms where obscure artists died like cockroaches and the dance-halls where Filipinos courted blondes with grieving fistfuls of tickets; this is my strange, passionate fiction, and I shall scream it till my lungs burst—

I am saint diaspora of the disenfranchised, America; the world's forgotten boy, America; all the lost and wounded, America;
and I will preach battered and bruised, like some slum-prophet swigging brown-bagged liquor

and I will hallucinate better worlds in rain-puddles bleeding lonesome neon in martyred streets

so let this be my industrial prayer—grant me the grace to burn like the Phoenix and to melt the million golden Ba'als that murder us
every
single day.

the mark of Cain

stricken by animal fear his sinewy arms
drag soil and scar dirt,
tilling wounds with wound-giver;

the sibling skull lies thoughtless
beneath his feet, finals words spilt
between the crevices of toes like little columns
of some pagan altar: the earth echoed his

wild aching cries and the blood-marked man
howled sun-struck and feral and the body
fertilized his crop as if a last gift to his brother
beloved—blood thundering in his godless temple.

the festering fields decried him
bastard-borne and sibling-stained,
this transgression that made him
a chthonic mortal,

borne of the earth and borne into it,
intertwined with the very world
that despised him

like roots knotting within the ribcage,
fastened to the vulgar ivory of a corpse,
tendrils like twine wrapping empty eyeholes.

the boy, naked against firmament all-
remembering, let crimson evening
simmer, patient to let but the stars
blanket

him.

insectile

every night is an impassioned supplication to a lone Christ,
an existential yearning for a final burial in those sacred arms,
a howl towards the Marian-luminous yet pallid moon for some
bittersweet salvation beyond my own weak-willed self, for

these satanic verses have been writ in blood, branded in flesh,
and at the last judgment I shall be split open, axe to a stump,
and read aloud to eternity like a testimonial to all of mankind's
grievous offenses.

as I writhe pusillanimously against the black coming of dawn,
this stir of a dead passion like a crushed insect twitching,
I rub my bruised hands insectile, hoping febrile—
yet founded—for the arrival of some luminous dusk.

hopscotch in purgatory

it's murder in some small way,
I just haven't been able to
figure it out—

my mind squeezed blank
across a voided pastoral,
skinned and hung to tan
in the absence of sun,

puddles beating their fists against me
with my reflection,
shadows staring short distance
like an invitation to the beyond—

I was dead
long before I was buried;
my coffin shall be
the participation trophy.

black forest

how cruel is this separation, to descend into these vast and contemplative
chambers of hell like some Orpheus searching his Eurydice in vain, her
pale specter soon feasting on the corpse of his forgotten affections,
Styx-swam and retention-rotted.

wandering throughout ashen planes of this inverse empyrean
I remember how, once, the mystics buried their minds
in these same depths like the backwoods carcass of an incest son,
traversing bare the godless wilderness within.

my shuffling corpse laughs coarsely, so lacerated that
the skewered skin hangs on as if to be sewed, needle and thread,
and still, such pain cannot quaver a bare inch against this
immensity set deep within.

morning-star

in a flare of holy anger I saw
the morning-star descend,
loosened from starry firmament
he dove the airy depths
like a stone piercing black sea—
a cold bolt slung wrathfully.

a scorched slug crawling raw
against the salted earth,
those great plumes
plucked and shriveled
as if ripped fresh from
the shivering backs of flies,

the flesh once wrapped taut
against muscle and sinew
now lay bruised
beyond recognition,
burned from the
meteoric descent:

an arabesque of wounds
oozing pathetic
their mortality.

and the eyes, my God, the *eyes* . . .
at once wrathful and terrified,

the teardrops of molten glass
scarring soft tissue
like cattle's brand.

beach

her tide's beating heart against white sand's breast
over vague and uncertain shores stranded;
the grey moon flickers like a dying bulb, flutters
its dead shine across watery gravestones,
shimmering within her crystalline shroud,
shivering chilblained skin.

at times it seems the world has contorted
to all sorrows's stoniness sunk within me,
this bleeding beach heaving heavy chest like
Clymene over Phaeton's wretched tomb,

and yet life turns a deaf ear to the dull thud
of desperation in my chest like an axe cleaving;
though the ocean swells red with memory,
though the sky bruises black with memory,

of all the love you began to bury within yourself,
and when hell has been populated by pregnant soil
well enough, then the dead shall once more roam the streets,
gibbering in bloodied sheets—thy expatriate of my bled soul.

I claw back wet sand frozen by the witches' black hour,
torn to threadbare madness by this infinite horizon,
all-stretching and brine-bathed by this incarnadine ruin,

extending, extending, extending further, front and back
and all around, until there exists little else but
sand and sky and sea—shrouded all within me.

the lycanthrope

(for Petrus Borel)

birthed naked onto bramble-bushes, rose's thorn cradled me soft, sweet,
serene as I lapped up crescent's drowsing liquor with parched lips, and,
limping slightly axe-split, hobbled towards the delicacy of my pastoral;
howling low, lovely, and lonesome I crawled against licking grass.

my maw split I cracked open, anticipating the dawn's coming rain;
my clumps of fur I bedded earth, shivering the day's slow nocturne;
my fangs into air I sank, stilling the second's bestial hunger;

ichor anew seeped slowly from dirt's dried veins, my sanguinary savor,
the cesarian scars of bitter earth that had so blasphemously borne me—
I bit into it with relish, letting her nectar pour forth from her laceration
to slake that ungodly thirst that afflicted me, until *it* but wax further.

(dis)harmonic

(*for Miles Davis*)

we taste sweet honey from the lion's corpse, dripping mad honeycomb
from labyrinthine ribcages, wind-passed pipes and holes procuring
strange and exotic melodies in clean-rotted constriction;
focus on (in)sanity: prune the mind, wound the bark, bleed the sap.

I hum mystic's maddening bliss, sputter holy fool's hymns in my throat—
these chant rhythms chart poorly; free ever-flowing modulation for me,
and the eternal forms shall spark in thine stigmatic sight,
bursts, bellows, and brilliance in splinters of ecstatic light.

set word to gesture, action to thought, and watch Rome burn
dreamily, sloughing golden chains snakeskin reveling within
the *without:* pure (p)antithesis supposed into synthesis like a
metallic horned squeal appealing to a dead warped divinity

blasting wild crazy pan-gnos-theistic intoxication into a flayed world;
and for the disenchanted you will become like something of the sacred
and for the godless you will be living flagellation pointing to God
and for the hopeless you will become something brilliant and mad.

Pseudo-Dionysus

I have always been that drunken alley cat howling smokestack lightnin'
who knew that sanctification comes in six-pack & Pall Malls,
Icarus wings forged lager-aluminum gliding on sweet sinner's grin,
the kid moaning Blind Willie in hell's back-alley Tin Pan bin.

ever since I could bleed I've been singing cooly my sweet sorrows
the changeling stranger stalking shallow grave's chill tomorrows
looking for which nymph exiled me from her little Eden:
nestling in the weeds—still crooning, still bleeding.

happening

hot-wired worship, a thunderbolt scorching mind's womb,
Persephone lording queen-like against a tar underworld tomb
of tenebrist crowds grime-bathed, sweat-slicked beat happenings,

brazen and battered with fuzz-blasted feedback screeching
like a harpy scorned, dead-drunk off that cheap ambrosia
cradling starry eyes to dive-bar heaven.

augury

slum prophet swarming mad with vision . . .
vaguely pagan & received in fragments
the severed head of my dead girlfriend cackled,
rolling up to my feet with a monkey's hideous grin

obscene tenebrism withers like an unrepentant Caravaggio—
faces melted into shadow
backs facing wicker effigy bonfire, the druidic ache
boiling inside myself.

the soil cries out with the blood of Abel;
I am Cain.
forests burn brightly as body disconnects from soul and spirit
and melds into mass consciousness amalgam of
old, ancestral woods.

I scry puddles of cheap, spilt beer
with as much reverence
as the guts of a sparrow in fleshy arabesque
blackly crisped by funeral pyre-fire;

prophecy comes to me in
spurts, licks, riffs,

and we are all pagans blasphemed by shared, ancient blood,
drowning in European viking inebriation.

we forget ourselves, forget everything—
save

the forest,
the fires,
the drink.

blood gushes
from my axe and I cannot wash the stain—Lady Macbeth
hallucinated
better
bedside

manners.

stray cloud slices
moon's eye, razor-like bleeding light over
blank-rite festivities— the orb hoisted like a
hangman as the sun sinks— a
millstone—into churning ink-stained
seas
the slain bull rises;
the matador is dead;

I am gored by the horns and
crucified
for the Lord

the head of my dead girlfriend
still laughing like a witch,
I slam a crucifix into her body
stake-like—herself writhing like a cockroach
my consciousness melts
like a candle

the sea swells pregnant with blood and swims with dead, waves
crashing
violently,
skeletons rattling
like marimbas

Dionysus lives, is torn apart once more,
recombines,
and lives again

tomorrow Phaeton shall crash the sun and burn us brighter than any
sacrifice but tonight Night
cradles us within her funeral shroud and even
now I can hear the
death-knell tolling,
brimming with angry silence
lockless doors open to the inner odes of skulls and towards
the drunken porch where Hamlet once
made his recitations

to the swarming pit, drained peach liquor
to ferment the ground, to imbibe the thirsty dead.

ego shatters like a thousand mirror fragments, swirling like spit in the sink

I do not create music,
only dissonance;
I am not a Miles but an Ornette,
and this is my supreme
howl.
my dead ex is
still
laughing her head off.

some translation of a French Symbolist/Late Romantic poem

sighing within divine decadence, awaiting eviscerating dawn, I swoon
like Nero over his lyre, expectant for my Rome to burn brilliantly:
some rose-bedded funeral pyre—

fragmented incense for the dying fragranced cruel like the ladies
of this sweat-stippled and eternal last night on earth,

whose sonorous smoke stains sorrowful skies, stirs brooding shadows,
forms beautiful shades that, like Eurydice's burning glance,
dissipate dull against my tortured gaze, sinking slowly into the ether—

this brooding necromancy of memory that sets upon my flesh
like the Furies melting the wax of my desire, for in self-immolation

do I yearn for that deathly pale, ache for the crimson ochre of parted lips,
pour forth these libations of a divine passion, if only to inebriate her
wine-stained and marble tomb—

for to lie sorrowfully in that labyrinthine sepulcher of perfumed arms
is all that I have ever asked, and even that is denied of me, now,

and now comes that most gentle purring of amorous annihilation, which
remains sweeter than any aphrodisiac, making us drunker than maenads
with delirious delight—

allow us to forget, like Orpheus, that most painful idealization which lives
within us, brought forth by a most vexing and ponderous melody.

incense

caught between libertine derangement and bleeding cross,
this crown of thorns marble-set & laurel-like against
the final ashtray of the grave, where my body shall sizzle
like embers tapped from God's great cigarette:

Lucifer defenestrated from heaven's stained-glass window.
and as Salomé demanded the head of John The Baptist shining on
silver platter, so, too, do we duly demand our corpse-pose, interred
within this divine decadence of martyrial-death, a marble crucifix.

noon casts expressionistic shadows against sun-drenched bacchanal,
piercing Dionysus' debauched rites with Apollo's sharp spear—
skewering sacrificial the gaze of all who dared to look or merely glance;
detritus fluttering in cold stir like parchment moths in grotesque course.

Lady Macbeth

her inky stillbirth floods a crimson deluge, incarnadining
those cleansing waters of the baptismal font, fouling
the ghostly oceans she wades in, wringing
dry the moon's celestial tears;

maddeningly the burning tide sluices against her,
waves shattering penitential like stained-glass

as daggers surround the woman's dripping brow,
an inverted crown, a murderous aureola
thirsting to spill the blood of their mistress,
to let it gush forth: a cask's worth.

her eyes twist and knot about like
avaricious serpents, never satiated—
maws strangled with the fat of their own tails,
chewing the remnants of her own sanity, at last.

Aphrodite

she smoked a Virginia Slim
like it would reverse
all the years on her,

and I lied, telling her
she was just as radiant
as when we had
first met;

it is a rough thing
when your first Muse ages,
and ages just poorly enough
to be recognizable like bad restoration
on some Pre-Raphaelite portrait.

the poets were not meant for this:

red pursed lips like a wire, two
rough-hewn eyes of jade
glimmer faintly, though

remain sepulchered beneath
sagging skin, with her figure
melted just the same—

a once-luminous pale
now seems more deathly than ever

—and in her laugh there is neither
aphrodisiac sweetness, nor
nymphlike humor, but rather
the slight rattle of something

that she is deeply afraid to show.

playing the part of the dutiful boyfriend,
I lead her worry into deep slumber,
and, like King David, pluck my lyre,
calming the madness of her years.

I've found that I don't fall in love as easily
as I used to, anymore, and that decades of abuse
have put my affection out of warranty
(so I must be careful),

but for the goddess herself to hang it up,
then there is no such thing as love, anymore.

the crepuscular vows

spotting Lady Death in pale reflections of mercurial pools
rain-laced with bitter dregs of silver moon, she stares
silently from afar, blushing pale and seductive, the sharpness
of a razor with those clear, grey eyes, like
swirling mist in European countrysides.

I used to recite to her from the Churchyard Poets in an act of devotion,
picnicking among the crumbling tombstones and moldy caskets, crows
gracing us with their presence like doves in holy matrimony, cawing
sweetly their moribund melodies in inky regality, and yet starless still

the skies they so swooned over, and I, as well, on such rare occasions
thinking about the ardor of our trysts, burying my face into her
milky-white skin—cold, shocking to the touch, yet not without
a soothing warmness that admitted no temperature.

she shall never leave me alone, for she watches steadfast, angel-like,
caressing me sweetly in those bitter moments and kissing me to slumber
with the softness of a mother, and in those rare moments I do admit that
I desire her again: our passion running deeper than any common burial.

Romeo's distress

laying my desperate love
into the ghost of a
murdered memory,
my sigh spurts smoke—

this Frankenstein's monster
fashioned from foraged fathers,
searching his true maker in
the dying dawn and the diluvian dusk,

blinder than Gloucester's peerless eyes
as I return to all the old dives and bled haunts
like a corpse wandering about his catacombs.

everything is a performance—
this neighborhood a set,
this hospital the backdrop

to something I will soon bury
like some poor gravedigger
knocking Yorick's sainted skull
about the unchristened dirt:

a pauper's grave and the same
sightless, soundless, yet
troubled tomb

that shall be my true inheritance
at the final knell.

autopsy

(for Iluka)

you dissect me amorously, as if
love letters were coroner's reports
and this, the autopsy of our
devotion. through death you remain

tenderest, and my wounds you gently
unstitch, resuture, warm hands cool scalpels
plunging into the traced skin, the raw flesh,
where your desire lay carved, bleeding.

bone shatters, splinters, cracks sonorously
with its sweet agony as I lie, corpse-still,
against the metal slab, within a patient decay.
nimbly, your gore-stained fingers stretch,

search, in the stark operating light
this luminous hollow squelching
with viscera thick, glut with blood.

upon this icy altar I have
sacrificed myself to you,
maenad-eyed and
ravenous:

there remains nothing
but dissection.

crucifix

(for Madelyn)

a lone rosary hangs, limp, over the rearview mirror,
and you, draped over me, and Christ upon the cross;
a flare of high-beams sear the window's stare over
our tongues intertwined in tender benediction,

and yet, already, I can feel your memory—
burnt heavily into the folds of my brain
with your frankincense, myrrh, darkly laden—

fade slow, aching, unravelling
the bandages that, like Lazarus,
have wrapped the raw flesh.

the divine violence of our passion,
it could've split heaven like a skull;
now the cliches are worn harder than
the leather on the backseat, peeling.

still the radio remains, murmuring poptunes—senseless,
bright and void, filling the oblivion of you when I
shut my eyes into yours, suck your lips ravaging mine,

this crucifix against my chest burning a
branding iron against yours, my gentle succubus;
I dream of soft damnation, seven minutes in hell

while my mouth parts as in silent prayer—
though you answer me with your own
in the angst of desire, for I cannot help
but to sacrifice myself upon the altar

of your marble skin, against your dove-
painted side, and you cannot help
but to whisper your confession
into my bruised ears: a willing penitent.

now,

the liquid crystal clock blinks, red-eyed,
shivering seconds into the past.
alone, I remain, in the sepulcher.

no resurrection—not
this time.

an unsent love letter to a relationship long gone, for a stranger I once knew intimately

(for Claire)

the sky's mouth opened a wound
as if waiting for a kiss, eviscerating bliss
that would never arrive, and the pale sun
peered wearily from its cloudy shroud:

too depressed to wink, too proud to cry,
and all the deadness of the earth seemed
unearthed in that moment—a burning lawn
in my mind to crawl through and lay upon,

to let the bitter grass become my blanket
for this funeral of slumbering decay:
the slow death of my passion.

a chamber drama with one continuous dialogue,
really, two monologues in conversation:
a one-act play on the brutality of love,
the weakness of the flesh,

to bring together two and dream as one,
and dream asunder of violent desire,
a hall of mirrors of the gaze of another,
admitting no further reflection.

and yet there shines no promise in the glass now,
not even my shadow dares to appear, as
the illusion shatters slowly, as
the fragments fall, capturing within them

only the movement of light, darkness, clouds,
the undeniable motion of the turning earth
as a testament to this gently fading life,
which must go on.

"I'll go on."

wax artery

some demiurge with the bleeding heart must've wept all over
his silkscreened sky—pasteboard-stiff stars tinged with tinsel-heat—
when he saw me all high-lonesome, languishing and lusterless

in this artificial paradise, this dime-store heaven; a heretic burning
slow in tungsten tombs, melted under the cheap neon *sturm-und-drang*.

    like late-nite cigarettes in some foreign country,

the incense struck differently, swirling

    like ballerina dancers in a deserted theatre,

half-past a yawning witch's hour, curling

    like slate-furred cats around the legs,

the shoulders, the arms, the neck, sighing . . .

I've felt a gnostic most of my life, and know
I'd make for a terrible saint if ever
I got the chance,

but passion still remains
The Passion,
and for this, I shall
suffer well:

patient, the ventricles
oil-flaming; alight,
the chambers
of my adoration.

crimson testimonial

those marble-hewn limbs
bound to barbarous bark—
a most potent sculpture
torn arms became,

in that exploded embrace
stretched wide His grasp slipping
from a world mad-raving.

a thorn-hewn halo orbited around
that browning brow, tanning
so terribly by blistering orb
of sweltering sun;

the splintering grain soaked up
the crimson rain
so thirstily—

libations for the carpenter's
tombing-tree.

tears and sweat stained
the three dead, dripping
against arid earth—
sorrow's dying deluge—

and in those bitter beads
strung against
heaving skin,
He found little refuge.

like a murderer drifting from the gallows
had he been strung up,
so utterly abhorred

by the very men He had tried
so desperately to save,
crucified by those He loved
so deliriously;

a father torn apart by his children;
a Saturn devoured by his brood;
a god sacrificed by his worshippers.

the thieves, faces grotesque
and cartoonish like
Halloween masks,

remained content to putrefy
in the misanthropic simmer,
as if the rays, too,
could crucify;

one of them laughed
and one of them cried,
and the former spat
and the latter sighed,

as bare-breasted and dryly-deposed,
The King Of The Jews had been left
wanting
for a crown.

all color bled from His flagellated musculature,
a frame bent, shattered and broken.
the teeth of the coffin-nails tore
hungrily through His sacred skin—

my God, my God . . .
how crookedly upon
the merciless wood
did He hang.

upon His rotting flesh the vultures
mercifully abstained, the miasma
of abattoirs gentler still

than the relic who lurched forward,
this putrefaction of our rotting Lord—

stretched taut His weary ligaments bound

but to *snap*
by simple process
of decay.

His mouth hung slightly ajar,
and yet no breath
sought its escape;

the flies gave final coronation
to the respect of majesty deceased,
hovering and shimmering
a lively shroud,

to the groom wedded willfully to His bride,
the sepulcher,
bound bravely towards His monastic cell,
the grave:

perfumed in myrrh's heavenly musk,
fashioned in silken cerement's brilliant drape,
sung in frankincense's lyrical scent.

as the god-man wrote
His final witness
in a scarlet hand,

even now
do I find the pages
bleeding, like

blistered kisses
against
burning sand.

maudit

A thousand telephone-pole crucifixions lined the freshly-bruising sunrise dappled with tints of blues, purples, reds and yellows, murmuring just above the cable-lines against the jagged backdrop of the mountains. The verdancy bestowed a certain pastoralism and a particular softness, a vague sense of secular pilgrimage nestled deep within the warm earth. Broken glass lining the road glittered sea-green as sunshine melted against the cold dirt.

An innkeeper snored in his glass coffin, painted faded orange on the plaster walls worn dull and dreary by decades of chain-smoking, as above him an analog clock flickered and hummed its small intensity, as if unable to make up its mind on what the time was, and so cycled through all of them: *[11-12-1:29-30-31]*. The Nite Owl's sign buzzed intermittently and flashed a garish neon-orange display, the mascot waving its fluorescent arms, its insomniac eyes never blinking.

Two made-up waitresses and a grease-stained line chef wiped down the linoleum counters and moped up the tiled floors, burned the boiling pot with the filtered grounds and fired up the propane stovetops, set the stale pies on display and restocked the little cigarette vending-machine that sat at the end of Terry's Diner, clicked on the sign that said *OPEN 24/7* and unlocked the glass-pane door.

Ladies-of-the-night yawned as they clocked-out of their mauve cat-house and wiped the plaster off of their faces, mascara smearing against their ruddy cheeks like oil-paint rinsed off its canvas. Drunks booted themselves out of Dead-Eye Dixie's Poker And Pub, a red skull fading in and out with holy eyes of blue flame with a smoking cigar firm between its yellow teeth, a royal flush adjacent to the death's-head.

Somewhere towards the entrance of the town stood a plaque that read, *Welcome To Ithaca, Virginia*. The population was nowhere present on the sign.

John studied the sign with great determination, as if there were some secret code to be deciphered beneath the baby-blue chipping paint and exposed, rotting cedar—or even in the graffiti that defaced it, the paint dripping with various epithets and declarations.

His pale, azure eyes could have held the ocean within them, squinting as he further scrutinized the display. Whether he was still a boy, or if it were more proper to call him a young man, he hadn't yet decided—for there were many things that a man did that he had not yet done. He was tall and thin, though not gaunt, with a stubbly beard and

ridges in his cheeks like the flesh had been carved from them with a chisel. There was something particular within the structure of his face that paradoxically rejected any kind of particularity, like an aggregate of a hundred men.

If you only looked at his clothes, and not at his hands, which were flecked and stained with a myriad of colors, one would get the impression that John Doe was a used-car salesman: he stood hunched a little in a slightly soiled camel-brown corduroy suit, wore a circus-like red-white-blue tie with an abstracted floral pattern over a light-blue Oxford shirt missing the neck-button.

On his legs were a pair of black slacks, and on his feet were two worn-in, off-white New Balances. In John's right hand hung a tattered suitcase—his left clutching a mess of brushes, as if he had a vendetta against them. He walked into town.

"I'm planning on staying the month," John muttered, awkwardly placing a small wad of bills on the innkeeper's desk, noticing the wooden paneling—the wooden *everything*—in the old, cramped lobby. A small color television fuzzily broadcasted a western, the gradient washed-out and cozy like a fading memory—the bad guy was shot dead by the good guy; justice restored just in time for the end-credits. The carpeted flooring was a shade of stained orange. He looked outside at the rest of the town waking up, and wearily rubbed his eyes, having not slept a wink on his journey into town.

The innkeeper nodded with a gravitas befitting his station, as guarantor of the rentable hearth: a balding, stout-ish man in his late sixties, who wore owlish spectacles that went well with his white mustache and beard, whose head came up to John's stomach.

He inspected the switchboard of keys, as if carefully selecting which would be most suitable to his customer, and finally pressed one into John's open palm: *Room 3*.

John flickered the light, scattering the cockroaches. He took off his suit, revealing a strange scatter of scars on his body mirroring the creases of the former, and opened up his suitcase—which held a number of both used and unused small canvasses, a couple of dirty shirts/pairs of underwear/socks, and a beat-to-hell copy of *Melmoth The Wanderer,* which he carried with him wherever he went, as if it was a Gideon Bible stolen from some other cheap motel.

From his suit's inner-pocket he procured an array of small oil-paint tubes like a carton of cigarettes, and set himself to task on opening the shutters of the room, which crackled as the sunlight was finally allowed

to pour into the dismal habitation. He carefully took the lamp off of the night-stand and squeezed an array of colors onto the wood, making a makeshift palette and smearing the colors together with a rusted pocketknife. Placed on the dressing drawers, an easel supported a fresh canvas.

He went into the bathroom and let the tap run—water shooting from the faucet like a stream of blood in an old-school samurai flick—into the cracked complimentary glass, his murky reflection in the chromium faucet-knobs, his bare feet against the jade-green tiling.

From one window, which was to the left of his bed—the bed directly across from the bathroom, the television being diagonal from the second window—where all he could see was the gas station, the grass surrounding it, and the mountains flanking it, as if it were some industrial pimple on the very face of Mother Nature.

He placed the glass on the night-stand, wiped the pocketknife on his white button-up shirt, placed the wet brush against the surface, and began to paint. John didn't smoke. *But maybe I'll start*, he thought to himself—just to make himself feel like an artist proper.

Cornered by the cigarette-machine in the furthermost booth of the diner, a turtlenecked poet scribbled verse madly, absorbed in his work; two ex-pats—a Frenchwoman and a Spaniard—whispered in a roughshod lingua franca of Homeric Greek over the counter; a dyed-blonde stared knowingly into the abyss of a mug of lipstick-stained black coffee, tape reinforcing a metal plate on the bridge of her nose; a group of junkies played a game of Spoons near the entrance.

Sheriff Rhodes sauntered in, an Asian-American man of average height and solid stature, whose boots solidly clicked against the floor with something pretending to be confidence but not quite, as if it were the clothes wearing the man, rather than the other way around.

He sat next to the blonde, and ordered a coffee and a slice of apple pie. The two shared a mutual silence, not once looking at the other. As the day stretched thin, and as the night grew long, however, he found the girl waiting for him, faithfully, on the usual engagement in his house.

"*Douglas, you're never gonna bring her back*," Lynda said, taking a drag of her Marlboro Red and blowing a ghostly ring of smoke as she sighed, her legs crossed one over the other. She sat in the recliner.

Sheriff Rhodes fidgeted childishly with his hat, his fingers feeling its cloth for reassurance, strength in the role that it bestowed upon him. He tried to feel like a proper man but the vitality had long since been drained from him.

The prostitute wore Dana Rhodes' bathrobe, Dana Rhodes's going-out perfume, Dana Rhodes's undergarments and Dana Rhodes's wedding-ring, was flipping through Dana Rhodes's copy of the T.V. Guide and was sitting like Dana Rhodes in Dana Rhodes's chair. And she had a can of Diet Dr. Pepper sweating on the table next to her, which was Dana Rhodes's favorite drink.

He didn't face her; he was too busy staring at the reflection of his dead wife in the shut-off television. She managed to wrench a smile onto her face with some effort.

"I appreciate the nose job and everything," she said, rubbing her nostrils delicately. "All this finery and whatnot—your wife had good taste, and I feel fancy. And you know, I've always been happy for your business. You treat me a hell of a lot better than the rest of the folk in this town," Lynda mused, as she tangled her hair with her fingers, tracing the ginger at the roots.

She placed her elbows on her legs, hunched over, and scrunched up her mouth a little, licking her lips and looking back up at Douglas. "I know you been real lonesome, darlin'—all my clients are lonely men, and some women, too." She opened her hands as if to gesture, only to clasp them back together again. "You and I, baby…you know, I don't say this to just *anyone*…" and Lynda trailed off for a little bit, as if waiting for some kind of reaction, some form of response.

But Rhodes kept his silence, and gave her none. He refused to turn around, and kept staring at her through the conduit of the screen. Her pleading eyes burnt into the small of his back, but, he didn't feel it.

"…but I really do enjoy our time together, y'know? Uhm, see—I think you're mighty cute. Hell, I've even been thinking…" she gulped, rubbing her hands together.

"…you know, what if we got *hitched?* I mean…I been lookin' for a good man myself—and I figure y'can't get any better than the *sheriff*… and, just being frank, *Doug,* I just, you know, *worry* about you sometimes."

Her fingers twisted into each other as she spoke, weaving and untangling as she blushed and stared at the floor, embarrassed at herself for bringing up such a sudden proposal, and yet, just as hopeful and just as eager as anybody else in her position would be.

He was as quiet as the grave. She rose from the recliner, like a ghost, and draped herself over him, and he crumpled like paper, falling headlong into her warm embrace. Lynda stroked his ink-black hair, Douglas's head resting on her warm shoulder, and, glancing at the

calendar that hung in the open kitchen, she realized that it had been two years since Sheriff Rhodes's wife had been murdered. Their reflections hung for a second in the calm, passive gaze of the television—a surreal image, that of a false reunion—until the sun drained itself completely from the sky, leaving the both of them in the tenderness of a true and complete darkness.

This lack of natural light bothered John, as the motel lighting (both the lamp-light as well as the overheads) proved anemic and flat. But he was tired from the day's work, anyways, and the last thing he wanted to do was to think of himself as a painter; he was still trying to write his epitaph on it, to find a good image to die on before he rotted in that motel-room where the cops would get called for body retrieval once he stunk the place up bad enough.

If there was salvation to be had, he thought to himself, *it was in making something beautiful enough to save yourself.* And yet, there was nothing beautiful within himself to paint, nor nothing to paint outside himself that he recognized as beautiful.

He wasn't a good poker player, but hell, it was a distraction.

"John *Doe*? The hell are you trying to fool?" the Dixie's bartender growled. He wore a bristly handlebar mustache underneath his pointy arrowhead nose with a set of crooked, yellowed tombstone teeth to match. The barkeep's glare was obscured by a pair of reflective-lens aviators, and his hair was long, brown and shaggy. The man lifted his shades and scrutinized John's driver's license further.

Eventually, though, he stopped caring, muttering something to the effect of *well, who cares anyways, you look old enough to me.* John ordered and downed a few shots of Fireball, the cinnamon whiskey tickling his stomach like Greek Fire.

Blown-out blues-punk played from a cheap, distorted P.A., as if the machine itself was verging on self-destruction, the audio coming out trebly and sharper than the darts being thrown at the back of the bar. A couple of rednecks started to get rowdy and pushed each other outside, tossing drunken haymakers that landed either haphazardly against the mark's red-flushed face or against the building itself, their hands throbbing in pain from striking concrete, spitting blood out onto the dirt, their bodies slamming hard and cold into the dusty gravel.

"*My love is a hot gun/and I wanna kill ya, hon,*" the music screamed. "*Gotta/gonna/give you a blast/make/sure/the violence lasts.*" Misty clouds of spit infected the air. Beer-bottles shattered against

unsuspecting heads, alcohol gushing forth like libations to some chthonic god of chaos.

From the smoke-choked and crimson-lit depths of the small-town slice-of-hell beckoned a strange machine, standing unnoticed from a neglected corner of the sprawling bar, and John, mesmerized, pushed through the poker tables, the drunks, and the brawlers, piercing the thick cigarette-and-cigar smog that clouded him mysteriously like the ghost of King Hamlet.

The exterior of the machine was painted matte-black, free from any adornment—save what seemed to be the replication of a Middle Ages woodcut-print on the top of the cabinet, in place of the title of the game, set in white paint and depicting a skeleton clad in a black shroud, clutching a scythe in his fleshless hands. He retrieved a quarter from his shirt-pocket, pressing the coin into the slot. It rang quietly but clear.

The game wordlessly beeped and hummed while John stared at the glass window of the cabinet. It flashed white for a second, the display, and slowly began to outline a tic-tac-toe grid. The button matrix was rather unconventional, as instead of regular circular buttons and a joystick, there was a plastic replication of the grid lined with red blinking *Xs*.

After a minute of deliberation, he carefully and firmly pressed the *X* occupying the bottom-left corner, and the machine deliberated just the same and placed an *O* of its own, so that the virtual grid was displayed as so:

[ ][ ][ ]
[ ][O][ ]
[X][ ][ ]

The machine promptly shut off.

John went back to the bartender and got stinking drunk, waking up with a headache like an axe-wound.

“More coffee, hun?” the waitress interrogated more than asked. He nodded, wilting in the diner-booth.

John looked around the entirety of the restaurant and realized that, despite having been around the place a couple of times before, he couldn’t recognize a single face—like the town had been comprised solely of ex-pats and drifters. Not a ghost town, but a town of ghosts. An indistinctive blur of humanity.

A fresh carton of cigarettes clinked into the retrieval tray, a stranger's hand groping about blindly for the death-nails. John turned around, looking first at this anonymous man, and then at the clock, which was flickering indecisively as per usual. He squinted at it, as if that would allow the time to set on something.

The display read *[10:12]*; Lynda arose groggily, exhausted not from lack of sleep, but rather from expense of emotion. Rhodes slept soundly beside her like a baby, not having touched her at all the night prior, save the arm draped around her waist, as if he were afraid of anything close to consummation, afraid that if he were to get physically involved with her, the living ghost of Dana, like Eurydice, would vanish in thin air. Lynda got out of Rhodes's late-wife's clothes and back into her own, pausing briefly at the mirror to straighten her hair and to reapply her makeup.

She noticed how the ginger continued to mount as the dye slowly disappeared, a conquest of color, and made a mental note to go to the supermarket to buy more hair dye. The prostitute turned around, to look back at Doug once more, and, unlike Lot's wife, did not turn into a pillar of salt.

And yet there was this little part of her that wished she *did*; as long as Rhodes was alive, she'd have to continue on with this charade—not because he was threatening her, and not because she needed the money, but because she loved the man so much it *hurt*. And this was the only way their relationship could play out: as a game of shades.

Lynda's house was small, but cozy, and she preferred it that way. It was loft-style—one large room with open kitchenette; a heart-shaped bed in the middle, since she did in-house appointments and house-calls if she needed the extra cash. Her dwellings, while plain, were furnished (though some would say *cluttered*) with an array of fashion pin-ups, various articles, album posters, replications of classical and modern art that all lined her house like wallpaper; a woman whose soul was collaged entire, thrifted and collected with a magpie's spirit.

A small bookshelf at her bedside was crammed with old, cheap reprint paperbacks, and she expanded her awareness of life in this small way; it was like trying to guess the picture of a jigsaw puzzle by looking at a few of the pieces.

But the more pieces she found, the more she found out that the puzzle was *much* larger than she'd thought, and it was this thought that secretly frightened her—that the world was on a greater scale that Lynda could ever fully comprehend. And no matter how hard she searched, there was never a singular key to unlock what it all meant for her, no one

thing that could solve it. And *that* was the most terrifying thing of them all.

In order to dispel her existential dread, she slid out an LP from a small vinyl collection of hers and danced around to that bit of sad, soulful doo-wop. And Lynda moved as if a marionette manipulated by her master, so beautifully and so sorrowfully.

Some time later she clocked in for the night, the cheap buzz and street-theatrics of the brothel as attractive as a pervert's hot rancid breath, the stereo's sleazy bump-and-grind rhythms as musical as an F.M. radio's static. Lynda ducked into the house wardrobe, an array of costumes set out for her—she could be different person every night if she really wanted to be.

The bulbs on the dressing-table buzzed harsh white light. Pulling open the drawer revealed a palette of makeup, smeared and slurred in schizophrenic array like an artist's frantic colors. She sat herself down at the station, adjusted her posture, raised her face up to the mirror, and, with much skill and practice, applied another face through a myriad of cheap colors—less to accentuate her natural beauty, and more to implement of a false one.

Lynda marked her eyes with blue eyeshadow, plumped her lips cherry-red, made midnight lashes as fierce as the spears of the sun, and curved her cheeks to the bone with careful foundational detail, adding a bit of rogue so as to underline the skull beneath her pale skin. She looked as exotic and as flamboyant as a peacock, but one look into those jade eyes, those that sparkled like cheap champagne, revealed a hidden intelligence, a world-weariness that couldn't come off with soap and water, and she stared deeply into her reflection, as if trying to augur that same feeling from within herself.

A porno flickered and flashed in the reflection of the second window of the motel-room, diagonal from the bed, and superimposed over the quiet landscape. In the distance was a Protestant chapel, no bigger than a trailer—a pine-box painted sheer white with a electric crucifix burning up the surrounding darkness. But this was a town with no priest, and so the strangeness of this tiny church without a pastor remained. Beside it was a sign that read *NO SALVATION WITHOUT CHRIST*, but this was a sign that had been painted a long time ago, and age had weathered the last part, so that just the first statement remained.

The motel-room television flickered over John's glazed-over stare as he laid slumped against the stiff-backed chair. His suit was sloughed off like snakeskin, lying crumpled on the floor, and without it, his shoulders

seemed smaller, his figure cut-out, sanded down. Those oceanic eyes held and beheld nothing. A mess of VHS tapes were sprawled before his feet, rented from the dirty video store part of the local cat-house.

At the moment he was watching three obese women parade as the Three Graces, in a set that was less Ancient Greece and more empire-in-ruins—dead, grassy plains and cheap, wooden sets, cardboard coliseums and tinsel crowns. A lyre-player, pale and gangly, awkwardly 'deflowered' the bored-looking Muses. The soundtrack was comprised of cheap, Casio-synth-replications of antiquated string-and-pipe arrangements that nobly tried to replicate the ambiance of its proper pastoral, and failed.

John glanced through the pile of Greco-Roman smut, with everything from *Nero & Agrippina* to *Zeus Does It All* (the latter the closest thing to a pornographic mock-epic, requiring four separate VHS tapes totaling several hours).

He quit his gaze of the television and walked over to the easel and stared at the painting with subdued intensity, as if to discern some kind of meaning within those strange splatters of color, the vague impressions of shapes, to impose a form that wasn't there, and to bring about a small sense of organization, that of his own man-made providence. But the chaos of his canvas quickly rejected this, and John felt lost within the obscurity of his own creation. He left the room soon after, though, as if having experienced some small form of gnosis.

The television was left to its own devices, faithfully continuing to televise to an absent audience.

"Pleasure to meet'cha, darling. You must be new around here, I reckon." Lynda smiled at her client, her painted face a fresh set of false teeth.

John nodded politely.

The brothel was a dense block of a building that admitted no windows, constructed out of adobe, and painted a mauve hue, with a blinking yellow arrow pointing to a matte-black door. This acted as an airlock, with the bouncer on a stool handling the finances for the evening, as there was another door that, once opened, brought forth an assault of sensuous purple lighting, slowly fading in-and-out.

The bar stood on the right side, a pole towards the back with a number of Victorian-style velvet couches—whose upholstery was fading and whose legs were rotting—upon which the ladies-of-the-night draped themselves over lifelessly, like corpses in tombs. The rooms were on the right-side of the cat-house—shotgun-shack style.

The peep-booths and the dirty video-store John had patronized earlier adjoined the main lobby—to the left, close to the entrance, past the bar and through an open door-frame. You could either go up to a girl, or ask for one by name, and John simply went to the first one that he saw.

Lynda smiled vacantly.

She took him by the hand to one of the rooms—a cramped little broom-closet of a bedroom, with the wallpaper peeling off: a gaudy vomit-green pattern comprised of a strict assortment of diamonds and hearts—and bade him to *take a seat, relax, get comfortable, maybe even undress a little*, if he felt so inclined, and at this, Lynda giggled like a schoolgirl, self-consciously playing into her role as a whore.

She had to laugh to keep from crying.

Lynda fetched a small bottle of cheap champagne, like a good hostess, and they drank the sickly-sweet stuff from two smudged flutes—her grin close to that of a kabuki mask's in its exaggeration. John sheepishly rustled off his clothes, awkwardly put a hand to her face, and licked his lips with a little hesitancy. She stroked his hair a little more maternally than seductively—he seemed to her like a kid who'd lost his innocence—and turned off the lights, leaving John to figure things out on his own, with Lynda hinting here and there.

Paint dripped from the makeshift easel onto the shag carpeting, but John paid no mind to this, as the bristles of the brush stabbed, daubed, laid flush against the surface of, and stained the canvas. A harsh glow streamed in through the window in slight increments. He had left his windows open day and night, as if to show he had nothing to hide, and so knew when exactly the sun disappeared, and when exactly it came back.

Sheriff Rhodes, on the other hand, was just barely visible through the slits of his office's shades—shuffling paperwork, moving things on his desk, every now and then getting up to pace the cramped constraints of the incandescent bulb-lit room. His shadow crept along the wall, the body it was attached to a little slow to follow.

Lives are made up of little bits of association, Rhodes mused to himself as he played around with the menagerie of junk in and around his desk, that, for him, was supposed to contain some fragmentary meaning: an empty picture-frame, a pen from his alma mater (the college's name had long since faded), a plastic spork leftover from lunch earlier that day—and yet, it seemed like there was nothing there, like a film with the frames missing, leaving the viewer to piece together the

story himself from context clues. Five years in this town and he hadn't really known a single soul, save his own, his deceased wife's, and Lynda's.

Even his workroom was a stranger to him, his deputies like shadows in the corners of an eye—whenever he worked nights they did days, and when he worked days they worked nights. It was some strange kind of circus-act of circumstance. And so the Sheriff's office really only had the *sheriff* in it, plus anyone sobering up in the drunk tank, or some petty-thief that he detained. And despite the problems the small town had, there were never any murders—some nasty barroom brawls, sure, but never so much blood spilled as to have killed a man.

A small plastic crucifix hung on the east wall, more as a reminder of religion than symbolic of the preference thereof—either Rhodes' own, or the town's. It glowed-in-the-dark, too.

He ran a hand over his face, feeling the even stubble peppering it—Douglas Rhodes was the kind of guy who shaved with disposable razors, who drank instant coffee. He thought of going back to Terry's Diner after his shift—he was scared of going back to an empty home.

Ithaca had become his burial ground.

He sat in his office in silence. It felt like someone was slowly tightening screws into his head; there was no color in his world but dyed-blonde.

He fished out a plastic cup and opened his desk—in which there were a mess of half-empty Fireball flasks and a few crumpled Marlboro cartons—and the rotgut trickled out into the receptacle. He drank it down and slammed it against his desk, the plastic fracturing and cutting slightly into his hand, producing little droplets of blood. He squeezed it even harder.

"Take a screwdriver."

The barkeep nodded, three ice-cubes dropped into a glass with a firm rattle. He poured a cascade of juice with a little bit of vodka and shook the receptacle.

John slapped a mess of small bills on the counter and scooped up the glass. He sipped the drink, wincing as he tasted the cheap mixture of bottom-shelf liquor and expired orange juice, but drank it all, nonetheless—cubes rattling and clamoring as he titled the glass towards him. And once he finished with this odd little ritual, he slammed the cup back onto the bar. It cracked slightly.

The barkeep swiped the glass like it was petty thievery and crumpled up the bills in a reddish claw, tending to the other patrons.

The painter had taken to cards as yet another distraction, but was flush enough so that it didn't really make a difference as to whether he won or not. He didn't *enjoy* the game, not exactly, but the sleazy atmosphere provided some kind of an inspiration, perhaps even unconsciously; the locals provided a color beyond the palette.

There was a live band tonight, too—and they weren't bad; just a little too loud, just a little off-key.

His paint-flecked fingers crept through his hand like a spider as he tried to place himself into the scene like he were his subject, to *live* the painting that he found himself in. And yet, despite his best efforts, he felt as if he were applying himself to a dried canvas, something that had long set before he arrived. And his was a fleck just a little too odd, a little too different. Even here, in a place full of scoundrels, thieves, killers, sideshow characters, rootless men and rootless women, lowlives and losers, he struggled to fit in.

At some point or another John simply gave up, frustrated, slammed his cards face-down on the astroturf of the table-fabric, and started wandering aimlessly around the bar—it seemed cramped as well as expanding, like a room shrouded in pure shadow. He felt as if he were in some kind of postmodern funhouse.

John's ears drew him close to the jangle of coins tumbling down a chute, dripping over the floor like blood, The source of the noise was a small slot-machine, *IMPORTED FROM VEGAS* stamped on its side like a cattle-brand.

Out of curiosity he fished a couple of bills out of his pocket and stuffed them into the machine's thin, greedy maw. He pulled the lever and released it, watching the three screens spin, which soon landed on a three-lane of revolvers. The machine exploded into a flurry of sound and flashing color. There was a distinct metallic *thunk* in the prize tray.

Doe groped around blindly until his hands closed over the cold steel, and retrieved his prize: a .38 snub-nose revolver, a single bullet in the chamber. He stared at the weapon for a few seconds in slight disbelief, his eyes darting around to see if anyone else was watching as he shoved the heat into his inner suit-jacket pocket. Then, as if he were going back to the usual business, John patronized the tic-tac-toe cabinet.

He gripped its chassis firmly like it were the warm handshake of an old friend, rummaged around for the familiar quarter, and pressed it into the slot like before. The machine blipped back to life, awakened from its sepulcher of disuse like a coin-operated Lazarus.

John surveyed the stark-white display once more, which was seemingly cut from digitized white marble, and placed into the pure analog ebon.

Staring into its void, it was as if the machine were revealing some kind of hidden knowledge to him—despite saying nothing and doing nothing, except waiting for John to strike a single *O* after his single *X*, as it was programmed to do so. He savored this mutual silence as if it were finely-aged, a far cry from the barbarians that composed the rest of the crowded and noisy dive.

This was sophistication, this was class, John thought to himself, resentful of the *hoi poloi* that had passively rejected him, through his own inability to fit in. And so he pressed the red plastic *X*. And the machine responded in turn, so that the game-state was set as such:

[ ][ ][ ]
[ ][O][ ]
[X][X][O]

xo, Lynda, she signed off—her heart hot lead in a melting chest. All of her tenderness had come off with a bitter aftertaste, like the dregs of soured wine.

She lifted the letter to her lips, waiting to press her signature onto it with baited breath, but restrained herself. Hastily, Lynda ran her eyes over the paper, making sure everything she needed to say was there, and messily stuffed the letter into the envelope.

Let the postman handle the damn thing, she thought, and placed a stamp on it, despite living within walking distance of Rhodes; her telephone had already been disconnected, with the rest of her utilities soon to follow.

Lynda walked over and inspected his photograph on her refrigerator, with much more longing than she could ever admit to herself, and, with much hesitation, cast it into her roaring fireplace. The picture curled up at the edges and disintegrated into ash, the picture of Doug in her mind consumed by flame—and yet the brand in her brain still remained.

She felt as if a part of herself had been violently torn out, blood tracking on the floor with the stain left for the house's next owner to clean up as the carpet silently soaked up her agony.

Loving is the loneliest of all the arts, she thought cruelly to herself, and set to packing up the rest of her things, before she was set to relocate from Ithaca. She chuckled sadly, drily, slightly amused—Ithaca. Lynda

pondered. How strange it sounded to have an American town named after a Greek island.

She had put in her two-weeks fourteen days ago, having saved up just enough to go somewhere else, to get a hotel, food, clothes, etc. She didn't know where, though, but she knew it had to be somewhere else. Still, she had to make one last call.

And of this, she couldn't rid herself.

It was a little extra money, that last bit that she really needed. It was a little more security, Lynda reassured herself, and whatever she did, she promised herself that she would never go back into that business ever again. Lynda felt there was something better for herself out there, but just didn't know what, and so put her trust into providence—all things towards their proper end, as she once remembered the concept explained to her when she was a little Catholic schoolgirl, innocent and ignorant of the world.

But that was another life, and here, she was living yet another, and soon, she'd live another one. She stared outside the mirror-like window, face imposed over the seedy nightlife, lamplight flickering against the dark streets and illuminating all of the local lowlife in its sentinel gaze.

The dim neon streets were dead-alive, swirling a sultry haze of cheap, dull enchantment, as ladies-of-the-night canvassed town with johns following in their shadows, the asphalt streets a taste of pure oblivion. Headlights winked and cut through the darkness in two-second increments, drunks tumbling out onto streets, pissing in alley-ways. John drifted through it all like some sort of half-conscious specter, with no idea of where he was going nor where he was supposed to go.

He spotted an old, crumbling cinematheque—*The Orpheus,* its NOW SHOWING right below the crackling lettering spelling out a noir double-feature: *RAT'S NEST/THE MOUSETRAP*.

He entered, settling himself into a creaky, hard-backed chair: a flip-seat. The flick flickered on the silver screen in grimy black-and-white to an audience nodding off, screaming, shooting up, fighting—an air-conditioned insane asylum that lasted about three hours for one-fifty per, the projection captured in majestic clouds of Marlboro-smoke as the reel unraveled:

A man adjusts his black umbrella. Another stands stiff in his trench-coat, plucking a coffin nail from a carton and puffing meditatively. Steam from a labyrinth of pipes rises like some sort of incense, both characters cutting twin shadows in the background—black ghosts in a flood of white steam.

Cut to an anonymous assassin aiming his sights at an unsuspecting target. Victim's head explodes like a rotten watermelon, chunks of black viscera showering concrete with a sickening splat. Blood spills across the screen and paints the lens in a inky, dripping wash.

42nd Street—schizo blur of fur-lined prosties tagged by paranoid johns, latchkey kids checking out monster movies way past their bedtime, taggers dipping into the boiling subway to hit trains, strung-out punks bleeding or drying out in alleys, dealers monitoring streets dead-eyed and half-buried hawking 'Special K,' packets of 'Nova,' gangs swigging brown bags and tossing empty bottles like Molotovs—glass shattering and sparkling in the cheap neon buzz. Some guy croaks in the middle of the street, throat-slit, and everyone just steps around him like street-trash.

A series of quick cuts. Tracking shot of the protagonist making his way through the city against a backdrop of peep-shows and grind-houses. He stops, suddenly. Pan left to a door which he kicks down. Camera follows him into darkness and he disappears, light fading from the protagonist as he's cloaked in the colors of night. Has the impression of the man being submerged into ink, parts of him being swallowed whole into that yawning uncertainty. But we know he'll be ok—he's bad. He's slick. He's a sleazy low-budget Odysseus. He's our guy.

Quick cut—protagonist racks his shotgun, spent shell hurtling out, burnt gunpowder singing the air, a door slammed off its hinges. Two bodyguards lay slain in the corner, now a third body to round out the police report—he aims the muzzle towards the man, casually pushing the barrel against his left eye, and his head goes off like there was a bottle rocket in it. He re-racks the shotgun, ejects another casing, and burns more gunpowder; a paint job for a white room.

Makes his exit the way he came in. Chandelier lays shattered in-between the twin staircases—a half-alive flicker—every single step glutted with corpses, walls with more holes in them than Swiss cheese, the hitman struggling through a flight of hitmen, made men, pusher men, all types of men, really—all the hues of the underworld pushing up daises.

Violently expressionistic crimson splashes stain the Neo-Classical wallpaper, Art Nouveau paintings needing to be scrubbed, decadence-era pots and vases needing to be restored—the entire building practically remodeled. He seemingly counts the croaked one by one, and hits the fridge. A lifeless body slumps out as soon as he opens the door,

which he promptly shoves aside for a carton of orange juice, on the rocks. Looks like somebody spilt grenadine on the kitchen tiling.

He steps out into the pissing sunlight, whizzing against sleepless Alphabet City like a dog on a fire-hydrant. The killer yawns, shambling over to Hubert's Break-Fast, a crane-shot revealing the rest of the dirty city.

"No greater pleasure than killing," *the voiceover states, with a tone of satisfaction.* "Makes you feel like a proper man, you know? Like cigarettes after sex." *He taps out a cancer-stick and puffs meditatively, smoke rising like prayers to a heaven that does not exist in that world.*

John stood up, the projection coloring him—his suit hanging on the back of the chair like a man fresh on the gallows, his eyes like a deer in the headlights.

Rhodes and his shopping-cart were reflected in the pristine white-tiling, and he observed the view from the floor. The anemic lightning made him feel like he were less a customer in a supermarket, and more an animal in a zoo, trapped in an artificial habitat. The cart jingled alongside all the other customer's in cheaply-produced harmony, swerving towards the meat-fridges.

He weighed the various cuts, judging them according to the price-per-pound, if he could afford them for the week. Two cases of Diet Dr. Pepper rested in the cart. His service-revolver rubbed coldly against his hip. Tampons were next on the list.

His mind started to empty out, and Rhodes began disassociating to the colorless fluorescents, the plastic-wrap, the pre-skinned, cut, sliced and packaged parts of cows, pigs, chicken, the slightly irritating muzak humming just above his head, inescapable.

There was some small part of him that made it all feel like murder.

But he continued on, anyways, unable to do anything about it. He observed the view from the floor until he spotted a glimmer of blonde like the shroud of a ghost.

Lynda was looking at the back of a box of ginger hair-dye, but as soon as he left she turned around, having seen him from the corner of her eye. She said nothing and did nothing, except turn back to the dye, and analyzed the ingredient list like one of her books.

He made his way to the self-checkout, and quietly paid for his groceries.

The headlights of his station wagon gazed out onto the tombstone of Dana Rhodes, and Douglas turned off his brights and his engine as he took out two cans of Diet Dr. Pepper, sat himself crisscrossed from her

burial ground, and set one can on her grave and the other he opened up for himself. He took a sip, and was soon reminded that he positively *hated* the laboratory flavor of diet soda. He kept drinking it until he finished the can, then went back to his car, and got another. They were all lukewarm.

The shadow of the grave crept over Rhodes's head, as if it were a hand in the act of comfort, but he found himself unable to be comforted. It was as if a swarm of hornets had built their nest in some hollow corner of his head, buzzing around and stinging the surface of his brain, their stingers piercing deep into his cerebral tissue.

He went back to his car and replenished his Diet Dr. Pepper with Fireball. And he sat in the graveyard all night, not saying one word but listening to the silence that accompanied him. And it was in this graveyard in which he understood that this was the most company that he had had for a very long time. The grass was patchy, mostly dirt, he noticed—deprived of its nutrients and barren.

Lynda's apartment was barren just the same, all of its previous *joie de vivre* stripped from the walls and packed into little cardboard boxes—her whole life able to fit in the trunk of her faithful 1999 sparkle-brown Toyota Camry.

She knocked on the motel-room door, Room 3, and its owner opened it, smiling vacantly. Lynda returned the pleasantry. There was something about him that seemed vaguely familiar.

"Do I know you?"

John scratched his beard thoughtlessly.

"No, not at all. Come in."

Sheriff Rhodes happened to be nearby when the shot rang out. He darted into the Nite-Owl as the innkeeper pointed towards the door of the room, to which Douglas slammed his left shoulder against it, and the door gave a little, but not enough.

He kept battering himself against the door, almost impotently, his arm bruising colorfully from the impact until, finally, the wood splintered, and he fell shoulder-first into the jagged mess of shards which jammed into his arm. He howled, clutching himself with his revolver-hand as he burst into the room.

Lynda's corpse was sprawled against the unwashed, bedbug-teeming bedsheets, her bright green eyes dimmed and her mess of blonde hair tousled and unseemly. She was still dressed in her fur-lined leopard-print bikini, the cheap high heels still on her throbbing feet, the blood

dripping from the hole in her head mirroring the leaky faucet in the bathroom.

Rhodes didn't hesitate, and his finger pulled the trigger before his mind had a chance to react. John had gone back to Dixie's about an hour before, and this is how his last game had played out:

[ ][ ][ ]
[X][O][ ]
[X][X][O]

[O][ ][ ]
[X][O][ ]
[X][X][O]

A line struck through the tripartite succession of Os, and the screen faded for a second. Then the machine displayed the insignia it carried on its matte-black chassis: that of the skeleton clad in his black shroud, clutching a scythe in his fleshless hands. And this image faded, too, but burnt like a cattle-brand in John's subconscious.

And it was this same image that flashed before John's eyes as he nursed the feel of burning lead in his chest. He had a giant hole within himself even before he was shot, and John only came to realize this as he lay bleeding out with no chance of recovery.

He clutched his heart, gasping for air like a goldfish outside its bowl, and lifted his hand as if about to give some final benediction, but instead turned away from Sheriff Rhodes and towards his painting, which was resting firmly against the easel. John's bloodied fingers stained the canvas crimson—the final stroke—and finally, the painter collapsed before his work. It was finished.

Sheriff Rhodes fell to his knees before the corpse of Lynda—his tears libations for a dead goddess, her cold lips the altar proper. And, finding no other way to express his true and all-encompassing sorrow, after seeing his dead wife killed once more, placed the revolver to his head and slowly cocked the hammer.

The third body slumped against the prostitute, diagonal from the slain painter, who was adjacent to herself. The television hummed in the background, broadcasting the dregs of an old western in black-and-white: "*Ain't no rest for the wicked, honey,"* a greasy bandit monologued, a crane-shot showing him wandering around the uncivilized wilderness,

trying to find his way back to a home that he never had. *"and I'm as rotten as they come*."

The night turned, by intervals, to day, and the next day was a quiet one.

All the drunks were hung out to dry like wet laundry on a clothesline, and all the ladies-of-the-night, like vampires, slept through the morning, and the afternoon, and on to the evening, not to be awoken until the sun had once more faded from the sky—its searing scorch replaced by the soothing balm of night, where all the sinners could once more congregate in their own liturgies under darkness.

The motel-owner had searched the room of John Doe after the authorities went in, removed the bodies, and taken the evidence. He quietly observed the negative space that the former crime scene created—the small facets of the man's life, the stillness in the disarray of how he left the room, and he had noticed the canvas in his survey:

It was a triptych of the Last Judgement—with little flourishes of Caravaggio's tenebrism, Greco's distortion, and Gogh's blurring, so that the representation was less a *physical* representation, and more a *metaphysical* one; it was as if someone had tried to paint the illness rather than the likeness of a thousand dead souls. The left panel depicted flames billowing against the masses of the damned, an array of demons stripping them of their flesh like armor in the spoils of war. The other two were left curiously blank.

The painting hung behind him in his glass coffin of an office, like the altarpiece of a cathedral, and on it, in minuscule script, was the signature: *J. Doe*. In the cramped lobby, the small color television fuzzily broadcasted the same western that it did when John had first arrived. The gradient remained washed-out, but was nowhere close to cozy, anymore.

sleepless

Ever since I was a child I've thought of the afterlife, and if there was life or simply just the *after*. I dreamt of the empty tomb of Christ, the earthiness of Goya's *Pinturas Negras*, the sleazy slasher film that appeared late nights when I should've been tucked away dreaming, that always dealt with the *corpus,* and yet never its *telos*.

"*We can find out together*," an old girlfriend on mine whispered to me as she danced a razor upon her porcelain skin. They found her with rope-burn around her neck. Afterwards, I envisioned her hanging, lifeless body swinging like the pendulum ensconced within a grandfather clock, the hands of the face ticking, chiming, shaving little minutes off of existence.

Just as well I remembered the waxen visage of my departed grandmother lying silent in the casket. They wanted me to kiss her, and I couldn't bring myself to imbue my warmth upon her the flesh that it so lacked. She stayed cold, remaining within a lost homeostasis, and to me, she remained an eternal corpse, proclaiming empyrean the bitter Wisconsin frost—her memory living no longer.

So the unknowing nature of death interred me within stained-glass shrouds bearing the inscriptions of martyrs; an Italian statue of St. Sebastian, felled by a marble forest of arrows; the burnt flambeaux of former lovers. My room, in its tenebrosity, became like the stale air of a crypt, slow and patient in its suffocation.

In nature, animals prefer dying in solitude—there is the elephant who climbs the hill alone, the dog who crawls underneath the porch; *man* wishes to surround himself with companionship, afraid that there shall be no further accompaniment within the tomb.

As the womb of the earth birthed the first beings, then the womb of the earth shall receive us back. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, catacombs and chapels fashioned with grinless skulls and empty sockets and forever stretching limbs. Remember the saints who kissed bare the heads stripped pure of the flesh.

Flora blossoms from the fertile rot of the body's last sigh, animals munch plants brought up within such soil, and the hunter, like a butcher, brains the animal, without anger nor hate.

Antigone once suffered to bring funerary rites unto her father, so it was ritual that I thought of as I lit the million candelabras. The room was

flooded with a virulent darkness, and it was with candlelight the razor gleamed.

I contemplated Don Juan and his lovers lost, grasping the tenebrosity of hell's dim light as he wandered throughout blackened pastures, in search of something not yet known.

I thought of all the artists part of the divine elect, saints who sanctified me in this loneliest art.

I wished for the mortuary cloud I felt to dissipate with my life, never to pierce me again like the sweet thorn of a rose.

The wind was moaning a dirge—some lullaby for this sleepless soul.

Silver struck my throat, the wound gushing such gorgeously deep crimson staining the floorboards. As the executioner I cried out, but the answer was already inscribed within my flesh, and as such have been guilty ever since the ill-fated birth of man. And like a pagan I prayed to whichever god would answer, in response receiving the silence of the tomb stony in its degrading pause.

Life poured forth from me, warmth fled from my body like a thief in the night; I could feel the burial shroud being placed over me, gagging me, wrapping around me, never letting go.

Death came to bear upon my personage.

Trees waited like mottled skeletons to be mulched, withered bare and yet rooted in a fecundity from the ardor of my decay, underneath a harvest moon glowering its unholy luminosity.

I woke up cold in a casket, cross crooked and looming over my unconsecrated mound, and shaking the dirt off myself I crawled out of my shallow grave, body deprived of function save for the structure of bone, ligaments providing flexion. Graves crept past me as I explored my birthing cemetery, myself gazing dully at the inscriptions writ upon the cracked stones.

Who loved them?

Not I, nor anyone I've known.

As the winds grew like the wingbeats of Lucifer, I ached for the shelter of a warm grave—where can I roam, where the chill of the tomb cannot deign to reach me?

Perhaps there was nowhere left to go; decay had inseminated the tomb, the earth's womb having received my seed.

To lie in slumber within decomposition: this is the route of all natural things; I had used up my mortality, laid out to dry like the skin of a lamb.

There was little left for me but to return, to bury myself entire within the warmth of the sepulcher.

As I placed a sapling on top of my body I thought of the bountiful fruit that it would come to bear in this life-after, enriched by this noble rot—how its roots would interlock with my ribs and grow between my arms and my legs, holding fast to the buried ivory as the maggots grew fat off of my own.

There is immortality of the soul, and yet there is an immortality of the body.

albatross

The dying sunset resembled the wake of an exploded Rothko, its messy form and swarming purple-reddish expression bleeding slowly into the sea as sun bisected land and water almost by Biblical command: separation during the creation of the earth.

Despite the vivid glowering in the sky the beach town was cold and desolate, Hawaiian shirts stuffed back into overflowing dressers for some warmer season, and yet the air paradoxically heaved thick and humid, carrying with it that ever-present ennui of listless summers, the surf lapping laconically at the deserted shore as seagulls crept about the beach with the silence of thieves.

The dashboard was on the fritz again—I had to bang on the damn thing just to keep the display on: a mad flurry of fluttering dials and blinking indicators. Cigarette ash fell onto my starched-collar shirt, the filterless Lucky Strike beginning to burn my lips. My eyes flickered to the rearview mirror, reflecting a shoebox situated on the molting red-vinyl upholstery. I picked it up, the weight shifting with uncertainty.

My reflection appeared vague in the liquor store-door's window, some shadowy flicker in the corner of an eye. The owner was a sentient blob of fat, pale and slovenly in his stained wifebeater with two venomous green eyes screwed tight into his skull burning like hotplates in a roach motel.

Trying not to stare I made the rounds down the aisles of cheap vodka and gin, every artery-clogged and whiskey-brined breath of his spiteful in the oppressively stagnant air, and placed a handle of whiskey on the counter as the man looked on with a passive hatred.

"Take those Black & Red sticks," I said, motioning towards the back-wall, and the owner sighed contemptuously as he turned around agonizingly slowly.

I placed a sweaty grip on the heat—cold steel against warm flesh—but as I raised the pistol my hand shook like I had the DTs and the gun clattered nosily as it crashed against the tiled floor————

I knew that *he* knew that *I* was *packing* and I dove towards the ground, just narrowly missing a nasty little shotgun blast aimed right at my greasy mug which would've made my last meal buckshot. It instead tore into the shelving behind my head, showering me with broken glass and paint-peeler vodka as I racked my piece and prayed to God or whoever else was listening to let me get a shot or two in edgewise.

Fluorescent bulbs crackled and flickered like dying, angry moths as I hid myself at the end of an aisle, noticing that through the reflection of the storefront's window the owner was struggling to reload, his fat fingers fumbling with the shells—an answer to my prayers by some nameless, sleazy deity.

Gathering my courage like spare change for a lotto ticket I forced my sweat-stained palm against the grip and got my arms to stop shaking enough and squeezed the trigger.

Bullets rang out like cracks of a whip—a bloody rose unfolding from the owner's chest staining his already-filthy undershirt, shots *two* and *three* making their way to his forehead splattering the back-wall with his brains like a murderous Pollock.

The movement in my finger became automatic with *four, five, six, seven, eight, nine,* making sure I got the job done and done right—after I was done with him, the poor bastard had more bullets in him than St. Sebastian did arrows.

I grabbed a hold of the handle I'd left on the counter and took a few swigs to brace myself, emptying the rest of its contents over the former store-owner. I fished for a match and gave the guy his viking funeral spare the sea, watching his fat-furnished body go up in flames. He'd melt like a candle, but right now, I had to get out of here before the whole place became one giant Catherine wheel.

I clicked on the television in my motel room: the evening news was busy signing my praises, comparing my arson to Nero's. The empty chattering faded in and out of my worn consciousness, my deafened perception, certain words weaving in and out of closed ears. I could feel a million stares around my motel room trying to pry in like crowbars.

I shut the lights off and closed my eyes.

My mind started flashing through the faces of familiar victims until all my memories melted together like wax and all I was left with was the monstrous abstraction of the slew of corpses left in my wake, all those bodies burning like effigies of flesh. There were some whose flames burnt brightly, and others whose sputtered, but the fires could never be quenched—and *they* would never leave me alone.

I dipped my fingers into the liquor store owner's wallet and stuffed the blood-money into my pocket, the picture on his driver's license following me with its pinprick eyes like a haunted portrait in an old castle. I shivered.

I glanced outside the window.

He was engulfed in flame, staring back at me as motionless as his corpse had been and stiller than packed dirt in a cold grave. I knew he would come back to haunt me, they always do; I augured as much within those swirls of blood and whiskey swirling against the scuffed tiling like the River Styx.

I've seen cemeteries worth of deceased by now, spat out from groaning tombs and yawning mausoleums, flesh crying out like Abel's blood in tilled soil. I've seen them march just to stare at me from afar, silently simmering and never saying a word. No matter where I went, I saw them, and they were everywhere—I was acquainted with the dead more than the living.

My skin started to itch.

I scratched myself, but the itching only got worse, and soon it became a persistent irritation, this greater irritation giving way to a sensation like my skin was burning. Every single hair on my head felt infested with lice, every single cell in my body writhing in pristine agony. My flesh crawled, simmering like the blood-lakes of hell, my body temperature slightly increasing and slowly becoming more and more unbearable.

I thrust myself into the shower and turned the handle to the right, but the water merely pattered against me pitifully, doing nothing to cool me off. I tore off my now-sopping clothes, sweat being the only thing to clothe my pale and grotesque body, and even *that* wasn't enough. I could throw myself into molten glass and feel some sense of relief.

I didn't care that I was stark-naked running around outside in the greasy dark and sweating pools everywhere I went, but—*the pool.*

I hopped the short fence surrounding the perimeter and plunged deep into its slimy depths, not yet serviced for the season and as such truly stygian in its disgusting accumulation but *relief. Relief at last, my God, relief.*

My open eyes stung terribly from the chlorine as well as all of the other chemicals swimming about in the sickly soup, and though the pool-water was murky I could still make out a shred of light—although it wasn't glimmering from the reflections of the moon nor from the cheap bulbs furnishing the motel.

The light grew stronger.

I discovered that the pool was much larger, and much deeper, than I'd expected, and that the light wasn't coming from outside the pool, but rather, from *inside*:

It was the collective of my victims, burning almost flagrantly, mockingly, blaspheming against the laws of physics, who had come to drag me down—a candelabra of the dead rising from unknown depths as they grabbed onto my body, the millstone of my sins being roped around my neck.

I thrashed about the fetid water while they latched onto my legs, my arms, my head and my neck, pulling me further and deeper into the nigh-infinite pool—lungs burning from the lack of oxygen, the rest of my body burning from the infernal heat radiating mercilessly from the aggregate of their flaming corpses.

I was melting—skin, flesh, bones—all dissolving into ash, everything, *melting*—the sky, the water, the cheap motel and the ghost town all swirling, swirling, *swirling* like dregs in a drain...

The sun rose wearily. The excitement of the arson saga had already died down and been replaced by another, more recent, string of local murders.

A beat cop yawned, clicked his pen, and set about dictating the crime-scene in black ink: bits of conversation overheard, minor details noticed, basic facts about the corpse—name, height, sex, the stuff found in his wallet, etc.:

> *drowned—no evidence (yet) of foul play - suicide? likely. completely naked (?). body shows no signs of struggle; no bruises or scratches. only one (1) mark of extreme scorching about the ankle (innermost left)—third-degree burn. inconclusive. will have to wait for coroner's report before further investigation.*

drift

The stereo blared with dull constancy, the artificiality of the butchered electronica rendering traffic lights and blinkers trancelike; a rave for the disenfranchised, the death disco of a nation shuddering on collapse where the suburbs were ground zero.

I felt this psychogeographic strangeness break over me like bleak waves as I glanced surreptitiously at the tortured arabesque of woman nodding off in the passenger's seat—suicide-blonde wolf-cut with cold eyes that could cut you up like fragments of stained glass, old Coke bottles sea-green with their dull, damning shine.

The breathless melange of overhead streetlamp illumination merged with my sight, my eyes feeling like two ashtrays freshly emptied, as the highway stretched off infinitely, absurdly, into the long, peerless night.

She came to soon enough, and I could feel her bewitching gaze piercing me anew.

"Jack . . . Jack . . . " she trailed off, her hot breath disgusting and intoxicating. I instinctively pulled away, but her damned stare caught me, and I felt inclined to listen.

Strips of aged, yellow light struck her face like in those old gothic flicks, and for a second I hallucinated Barbara Steele riding shotgun, but blinked and instead saw my loveliest scourge, who yet loathed me and loved me just the same, if not more passionately, and for this reason we had stuck together this long, continually caught in the eyes of the other like cracked mirrors.

And oh, how we yearned to shatter such reflections.

"Mmm. What's up."

She flicked a match for her cigarette, fire flickering over her pale, beautiful, cutting face. She puffed contemplatively.

"Let's pop over to the gas station. I'm thirsty, babe."

"Alright." And I turned and pulled over and opened and slammed the door as she waited patiently inside, the cheap fluorescence glaring angrily, almost blasphemously, like some electric idol; a golden calf, wired.

The door jingled merrily, and as I left the black plastic made me nostalgic somehow for some dim reminiscence that escaped me. Michelle shifted her stare while I walked out of the door and back to the car, herself watching passively, green eyes flickering and fading in the surrounding pitch-darkness like headlights over a desolate backroad.

I sped past a graveyard or two shrouded in moonlight, and in the momentary flash of the car's beams against those mossy stones I could've hallucinated a miniature of our own town in the ragged arrangements of such tenements of the dead, a true mirror to the suburbia I've known and loathed and suffocated in all my life. The phantasms of memory prove the least amicable.

We were all ghosts, dead before death and alive in rare moments of brilliance and passion that were everlastingly fleeting, as transient as the chemical warmth from a good hit of heroin. And my passion towards *her* that thudded away in my head like a pickaxe to the brain was nothing if not chemical.

I leaned over and kissed her, half-passionately, half-dead, and she miscalculated and thrust her tongue into my mouth like a dagger, to which I nearly gagged. I just had to laugh.

We could've only found each other, were lonely enough for each other, were trying to glue back the pieces of the other.

We were both sick, just sick enough to last.

Our love was a morgue.

Now the streetlights started to disappear as the moon began to turn rancid, starting to decompose and leaving little but the dull gaze of the car's beams to guide us through like thread looping through the eye of a needle. Trees started to melt away, replaced by a battalion of burning crosses—stakes at the stake, tongues of fire writhing weepingly from wood and pouring out their sorrow upon their unholy crucifixions, and Michelle's gaze cooled, making these broiling woods reflected in her eyes ashen with a single,
waterless blink.

I kept driving with but a single thought—the need to slough off this accursed heat—and I found, as I had known it once before, the lake made mythic with rumors of the suicides of college students. I flayed myself of all clothing—jeans and shirt limp in my hands like the skin of St. Bartholomew—diving headlong into the freezing pitch to escape a forest fierier than the tombs of heretics, the water as deep and as cool as pure oblivion.

I opened my eyes as I swam through the murky depths, seeing the bodies of a million forgotten names with tangles of hair blossoming and billowing, wordless mouths rapidly pantomiming desperate conversation.

I felt an astronaut of some galaxy populated by living corpses, the husks and skeletal frames that comprised bare remembrance, and in this liquid slaughterhouse the sky could not help but to reflect its galaxy in this waterlogged cemetery.

Swirling around a little more in the amniotic fluid, as if waiting for a rebirth, I turned over and floated on my back towards the cosmos threatening to swallow me up and spit me back into a place of stars, light, void. I felt as large as the lake and as insignificant as a water-bug, my consciousness dispersed throughout a placid ebb and flow. Yet I soon felt myself dragged down underneath the surface, and I relinquished the will to struggle, letting myself be led to what I assumed to be my final resting place.

As I drifted off into the unknowable I felt an odd collision of flesh fighting mad against the consuming gravity of the lake, throwing me out of the lake and back onto dry land.

Michelle's once-powerful jade expression had faded into an animal fear, her eyes no longer carrying the power they once had and betraying a scared innocence like a child. She was naked, trembling, her hair plastered over her face with her tears commingling with saltwater and dripping over my face, her kiss tasting like something once lost.

"*Don't leave me*," she murmured, "*don't die.*" Hesitating, she added a "*please*" to her conviction. She held onto me like a little girl with a doll as her only companion. We both dried off. Once we got back to the car her lips clung to mine for an uncomfortably long period; she had attachment issues. So did I.

Maybe that was the other reason we've clung to each other for as long as we have—to murder that feeling of being stripped of one's flesh, to remain as living bandages to the other's wounds.

All of America blends together once you've spent enough time in it, but soon enough the usual monoliths of commerce and commodity began to arise on our drive, the greasy glare of the cars blurring into one another seeming slightly more familiar—our prison of concrete and asphalt distinct from the others.

I steered to a bastion of personal culture, the Checkers off 234, and we shared oily napkins and fat-drenched burgers. The sign before us flashed and flickered and hummed its death-rattle, but it was too stubborn, too broken, to completely burn out in this dead, dry air.

The stereo shrieked wild with no-wave disco, saxophonic slashes, a dance for the tuneless. It was harsh noise but I liked harsh noise, and my

heart thudded in tempo to its arrhythmic pulsing as I tried not to think of the vast emptiness that surrounded us, that surrounded our car, where we were slowly dying, not in body but in spirit.

We drove up to the memory of a madhouse—dilapidated, torn apart, and in its decay looking as if it were ran by the inmates themselves. In remembrance of the death-cults of my youth I chucked an empty beer can at the glassless window, remembering it to be the holding cell of a cherry bomb-redhead: a pathological liar, the kind who could lie up a whole Hollywood film script if she got into the business. She got hitched to some guy in the asylum she knew for about two weeks, someone just as crazy as her, to tie the knot for the noose to take the plunge together.

I prayed to God that they didn't have kids.

We went back home, letting our thoughts spill out into the eternal chasm of sleep, where the groans and creaks of the industrial wilderness and the lonely freight trains howling at midnight and the odd motor revving for one last ride made their cameo in the schizophrenic nothingness of the suburban void, as we pulled the covers over our heads. A pair of jeans in our closet hung guiltily like a man executed, ourselves draped over the other in bed as if the crime were a double poisoning.

Night had draped itself over us like a man over the tomb of his beloved, the stars watching over us in mortuary silence as we lay entangled within the other, a Gordian knot of the flesh, our bodies sweaty and cold and gasping for warmth and trapped in the hold of the other, waiting to awaken the next day, to continue this drift throughout life, through our love half-alive, past the daytime yawn like the gaping wound of America, and once more through the hallucinatory dreams borne in her strange hearth.

errata

It teemed like a black mass of beetles, constantly swarming in place; it was roughly the average size of an adult woman, just half a foot shorter than I was—a living shade, a three-dimensional shadow brimming with supernatural energy.

I located it on the side of a Checkers across the main road, diagonal to the tobacco shop and the Indian cafe, perpendicular to the Taco Bell near the Chinese buffet—all these buildings that felt like the walls of a labyrinth, the streetlights' dim brilliance illuminating scabs of road lying obscure in swaths of night, headlights yawning over streets and across grassy medians, myself and the non-entity standing together in front of the fast food joint.

It had a name, a face, an identity, now lost to all but I who kept her company in that swarming, whispering, sickly summer-night air like radio static.

I loved her, once.

We called around a month ago, and she took a handful of sleeping pills without telling me after I hung up.

She loved me too.

It was evident that our love wasn't enough; she became a statistic instead. She grew cold in the ground as I became frigid in my heart, and when the news finally reached me, I was unfazed—not out of shock or stupor, but because I simply felt blank, lacking a proper response.

I knew this was going to happen. I always knew this was going to happen. I knew I wouldn't be able to do anything about what was going to happen.

But I never knew it was going to happen then, so soon, so suddenly.

I got her some Checkers shortly before she went away, before she made her last night on earth, which might be why she lurks here.

A lot of old myths and superstition will tell you that the dead reside at their place of death, but that's not true; they *decide* where to roam, what to haunt, whom they are visible to—and apparently I'm the only one whom she wants to be able to see her. And when I saw her for the first time, I was almost certain I knew who it was; I felt her personal energy.

I got my order and I got hers, opting for the walk-up window. She flickered over a table, those circular ones with the red umbrellas on the top, and I sorted out our meals and placed the straw in her drink. Regular

Coke for me, Diet for her, and did she want any ketchup? I put some over her fries. She was silent.

She didn't sit down. I did. I talked to her. I made conversation for the both of us. I talked about how much I missed her, how her lips tasted, how I remembered all those lonely conversations we had. In life, she said she loved the sound of my voice. Now she kept her words far from her lips. This, I understood.

Her food was cold. Her presence was, too. Most suicides are like that.

I don't remember when I left the table that night, but when I did, I knew it was the last time I'd be seeing her. It was temporary—you can't haunt a Checkers forever, no matter if you're a soul without a body or a body without a soul.

I never went back to see if she was still there. I don't think it made too much of a difference for her.

She had already left me; it was my turn.

starless

Aimlessly I swam through a neon sea of traffic lights and deserted bars, cruising long, meaningless slabs of asphalt with no true destination. The longer I journeyed, the more life thinned out until I was the only soul there; the night had aged vintage.

Automated, automatic life was carried out through intersections, nonsensical red-green-yellow lights flashing to vacuous non-arrangements of space un-occupying the roads. Gigantic, almost imposing marquees of the big box stores kept flickering, just in case someone were to notice them, by chance, and the strip malls and outlets were, in fact, much better lit than the roads, and for little purpose other than advertising.

Stripped of its inhabitants, the suburbs were a sandbox with no sand; it stopped resembling itself almost entirely and became a consecutive series of disconnected spaces, the metaphysical structure dissolving in the pure absence of self-facilitated movement and dictated by the psychogeographical constraints of the neighborhoods, the highway system, the roads devoid of cars.

This was a night without stars; a town without its people, only I in their place. They slept, their functions within the regular day-to-day temporarily absent and truly absurd in their absence.

The night was a conduit, and I wanted to participate.

I went back into my car, parked outside the crusty shell of a gas station, and turned off my headlights as the night was opened itself up to me in the uncertain dark, its spatial limitations unaware and theoretically infinite. I jammed the key into ignition as I backed out of the cross-stitch of perpendicular lines and rapidly saw them switch before me, changing and reconfiguring like notes in the harmonic context of free jazz.

All the traffic signs began to sprout from the ground and be buried into it, some gliding through air and others hovering patiently at a fixed point. As I drove into the confusion I took my hands off the wheel, the ever-evolving highway melding with my car to drive me to a destination soon to be realized. Overpasses and underpasses and loops extended straight into the sky, stretching on for a finite distance or otherwise self-contradicting.

Soon I realized that there was no direction to be reached, no linear progress to be made as the car went on and on, never running out of gas

nor needing an oil change, sparked by some unknown energy to constantly continue.

The A/C works quite well, the radio spews cryptic anagrams in lieu of commercial breaks, and the headlights have long ceased to function.

This is a land of the eternal night, a time-vortex in which I have been trapped within for three and three-quarters of a year, and nothing seems to be changing or to have changed. All I know is that the stars will never shine again.

My only company are these hollow signifiers for a nonexistent civilization, the constant electricity that jogs the sleeping world with its flash and display, and this firsthand account, written from the back of a stained Checkers receipt scrawled in discarded children's red crayon from a visit to Carrabba's 7 months ago, will be the only evidence of my continuous experience.

Is this purgatory, as I am stuck in a listless continuum? Shall it be considered endless suffering, for a lack of free will? Or perhaps this is truly paradise, for no harm can come to me?

The answer haunts me, for I do not know.

MURDERTRANCE

I scrolled through my Letterboxd feed mindlessly on some listless Friday night, perusing various screeds and scrawls written about low-budget and entirely obscure Hong Kong Cat. 3 and American S.O.V.; region-exclusive joints trapped within the thirty-dollar confines of some boutique label or otherwise only available on a crusty pan-and-scan VHS copy from the original director. October was the cruelest month; there were a few grindhouse revival circuits in my city but most of them were just doing straight re-runs of the typical gutter classics: Hennenlotter marathons, Italo-Cannibal scrapings, and a few better-known regional concoctions. The mainstream cinematheques were dead-set on the trilogy of F13, NOES, and Halloween.

I checked my emails amidst the crackle of golden-brown leaves as I walked around the neighborhood.

Subject: Need a (celluloid) fix !!
From: inky.winks@gmail.com
To: bannedfromtheroxxi@gmail.com

Hiiii bestie!! How are u??? So bored rn...thinking of copping screenings of some sick flicks but all my locals are only showing the regular gunk and I'm interested in something new.

U know anything that might be up my alley? No direct links this time pls, I got a virus from the last website you shot me for that Emanuelle film you've been pestering me to watch :(

Anyways, hope all is good with ya!

Noah

Subject: Need a (celluloid) fix !!
From: thenewbev@gmail.com
To: inky.winks@gmail.com

Hi GORGEOUS! I'm doing v well, how are u!??!? So lovely to hear from u, I actually just got back from recording an album! X_X Tbh I know

exactly what u mean, all the new releases have been so BORING and my locals haven't been showing ANYTHING interesting either!!

How can I girlboss in public w/o my French Extremity films??? <3 Anyways, I DO know that there's been this new film that's been going around called Gritos De La Luz de Luna or smth like that, idk I don't speak Spanish unlike YOU!!!

There aren't any subtitles which really isn't a problem honestly cause its a MURDERDRONE film, which I know u love!! It's really hard to come by on the internet (sorry darling no virus-ridden links this time xxx) but I heard that in some places they have duplicates of the reel

All I know is that it was made in Spain an that's pretty much it! Hope you can find it! It's really gory and weird and stuff, and you'd probably like it (and understand it) better than I did hehehe

Cheers!

Bevy

The possibility of a new film in the Murderdrone canon was much too interesting to pass up—especially considering the subgenre's typical output was, for the most part, relegated to France and America. A Spanish branch would be even more intriguing. I scrolled around on LB some more for details on the movie, and saw a poster that resembled something more akin to the events of *Un Chien Andalou*.

Bev's review was posted with her typical Adderalic, disaffected thirtysomething-y/o prose that gabbed about some minutiae about the film like how she wanted to bang the killer. Dave gave it five stars; praise of the highest order from none other than the chief sleazebag in charge of my favorite underground cinema zine; I hit him up with an email asking about the particulars, and he shot one back in about two week's time.

Subject: Gritos de La Luz de La Luna
From: cclassic45@gmail.com
To: inky.winks@gmail.com

Hey young padawan,

Sorry I couldn't get to your email sooner. My typewriter(s) got busted and delayed the release of the last issue, so I had to get them fixed up pronto.

I've never been able to find a proper copy (physical/digital), not even a crusty pan-and-scan VHS rip.

The only time I was able to see it was when I went over to visit a friend in (*location censored for privacy*). It was shown in this cramped "arthouse" in the bowels of their Chinatown, far away from tourist's view and for good reason.

It was actually an old whorehouse that was someone's apartment that was now being used to screen underground trash. It's a pretty wild story; apparently, 42nd Street Pete regularly haunted the joint way back when.

It's about thirty minutes in length and was, naturally, a shitty D.I.Y. effort by some dude named Ramon Izquierda. But a good kind of shitty, the kind we like.

Actors seem to be pretty sparse: generic murder victims, nothing interesting there and nobody I recognized. I cross-referenced the director and his work with a billion different scum-film databases but the guy never showed up.

I would say this would be par for the course, but even the most buried films have always come up with something, at least a trace. Something's up.

I'm not even sure they showed the film in its entirety, for as much as murderdrone is essentially plotless it still felt like there was something missing in the story.

I'm going to continue to research further out of pure curiosity, and also the fact that I want to post a review of the complete article in the zine.

You hear of anything, or get a pulse on the director or any one of his actors, let me know.

— Dave

I burnt through my archival collections of classic splatter and film-esoterica zines, hoping to discover some lead buried in the sprawling mountains of amateur text, but to no avail. The next few weeks were spent shooting cold emails, jotting down numbers, and making connections, just to get a hint of where to go next.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I was tuned to a dead channel; not even the heads at *BLEEDING SKULL!* had any clue. It proved to be the holiest grail of sleazoid celluloid; the golden egg; the Lovecraftian idol that drove everyone mad by *not* seeing it.

I kept on, still, like so many in my critic's circle doing the requisite work between visual gorgings of Frank Grow and Damon Packard joints, writing constantly to whomever I could get my filthy mitts on. Like a junkie needed a hit, I needed this movie, even if it turned out to be complete garbage after all was said and done. It was the mythology itself that was the lure, its unspoken promise that this could be some sort of filmic missing
link or even the next cult classic. I had to see it—I hadn't left the house in a month, in complete stupor on account of the dregs of bacchanalian October's past, now the ennui of November's start. I subsisted on Cup O' Noodles and cheap beer, and I felt like living hell. I hadn't shown up to work in what felt like two eternities, and I received my pink slip by mail and I just tossed the damn thing into the trash. I couldn't care less. My landlord had given me my two week's warning about ten days ago and I did the same.

I was too entranced in my work, too diligent in my research, and too fervent in my devotion to *anything* I could dig up about this damn movie that all else was secondary.

I checked Letterboxd again.

MEMBERS FANS LIKES **REVIEWS** LISTS

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watched by **Don John** 17 Sept. 2023

Lost.

(5 stars and a heart) watched by **Dav Y. Jones** 13 Dec 2022

I would brutally murder and bury a family of three if I could get the full cut of this/a VHS rip. Hit me up if anyone has any more details on whatever the hell th-is thing is.

(1/2 stars) watched by **The New Bev** 10 Oct 2023

ok so not really my thing tbh but the killer was SOOOO hot!! Loved the dog too ofc but not the fact that he got killed off :(the killer is literally me (him when he's run-ning after that one girl with the bleach-blonde hair) wh-en I'm doing cardio! How about stalking ME next time hmmmm???

---

watched by **Magikarp**

An editor friend of mine was able to piece together the thirty-minute cut that's been going around here and there with a rare work print he happened to find inside an ancient projector he bought while he was in Spain at a flea market.

Nothing really compares. He's charging a hundred bucks per rental for the beast, and I can definitely say it's worth it. Contact me if you're interested. I can work things out with him for you.

My eyes burnt like a branding iron into every single word that last review said; here was a quest that held no more search, no more scouring, promised the end of all my research and presented the artifact readymade, all for the price of a *few measly bucks*. It was all leading up to this, and I couldn't cop-out. I talked to the guy, made the necessary arrangements, sent his friend the cash through Venmo. It did make me just a little uncomfortable to give them my address, but they promised to bring the film to project in all its gloriously low-fi 8mm glory. If anything, *that* was much better than any simple VHS rip or digitization. And I was beyond desperate, clamoring for my fix, hungry to get a drop of that celestial gutter-stuff of cinema that lurks beyond the frame and exists in the outsider plane of art.

Around a week later they arrived at my door; I let them in.

The two were just as sullen-eyed and ghastly as I looked, not saying a single word as they entered into my small apartment turned squalid and rotten by my own self- imposed negligence. Fast-food wrappers and ramen packets drowned the floor in a sort of melange of fast-capitalism, a sea of detritus that one could veritably swim in. Roaches and ants picked at whatever carrion they could get their hands on, the half-eaten Taco Bell that I never got around to throwing away that was ordered weeks ago glowing with various shades of bacterial culture. Flies swarmed around like pestilence, and I was infested with lice. You could've easily been mistaken that there was a dead body in the apartment with how badly it reeked, all manners of flies, maggots, roaches making my home their new habitat. Everything itched; it felt like I was wearing a hair shirt.

As what I assumed was the friend of the guy set up the projector, I thought oddly to myself that if such disarray and filth would be akin to what plague doctors saw in the Middle Ages upon entering the houses of the diseased.

I stared intently as they placed the reels into the projector, observing all the minutiae of setup. Like a pair of Lazaruses it was as if they had but just shaken the tomb-cold off themselves, Andreyevian husks who could only stare into the sun now replaced by the all-enduring bucolic glow of celluloid, burning into the walls of my apartment rendered catacombic by the mess and deprived of all its prior warmth as a home. It had become my office, all things serving the end of what I was finally about to watch.

"You ready?" the one with greasy, black hair croaked in a shuttering voice.

"Yeah, film's all set up," spoke the other, bald and eyes whiter than nothing that melted across his drooping face.

"Alright, let's do it," I said, feeling a mixture of uneasiness and excitement.

The projectionist flicked on the switch as his friend turned off the lights. The film projected against the tabula rasa background swirled and swam, mutating like a blurred haze in a bad dream—the scraps and remnants of filmed vignettes converging together into a microcosm of mindscapes of accidental surrealism. Punctured by a Casio synth score and drowned in bargain-bin colored LED fixtures and shot in budget film stock that made everything all at once looked washed-out and grimy with the internal rhythmic structure of free jazz strangeness slurried and disharmonious,

and bolstered by bloody bright-red FX that recalled previous avant-gore experiments, *Gritos De La Luz de Luna* was as disorientingly brilliant as it was deceivingly base; the true convergence of arthouse and grindhouse I had hoped for all my life had finally come true, and in their conjugal union spawned this beautiful, disfigured child in their wake:

A collage of dissected animal parts in a biology lab cold-opens the film; the unending eyes of lambs and guts of split frogs, the visual smell of formaldehyde stinging the nostrils. Calf's brains spilt like the overflowing of a cornucopia horn. It becomes clear to me very soon that these shots have nothing to do with the movie but still provide lots of visual interest. Soon enough it cuts to a wide-shot of a river under a bridge, moon's white-light glimmering over the inky pitch like oil.

Another cut reveals the P.O.V. of the killer suiting up, putting on gloves and running his hands over an array of steel implements ready to carve, cleave and cut. The stalking shadow of the figure cloaked in black trench-coat and hat moves swiftly through a near-deserted city, his black gloves glaring blasphemously in the greasy yellow buzz of lamplight. Soon enough he begins strangling a lady of the night, nearly drained of life and eyes wider than saucers with green pupils rendered pinpoints, and gaping halfway between the sounds of a tortured scream and the pure, Dionysian delight of a bacchant in rapture. A razor flicked open gleams in the pale of the moon, and like a violinist pressing bow to string he pulls the instrument across her porcelain skin, a violent shade of crimson erupting from her neck—the blade dripping guilty the essence of life from a thirsty edge. Darkness and light invert terribly, brilliantly, jutting shadows like the set of a German Expressionist film set, painting the murderer to his highest moment of purified bloodlust.

The title-card hits with a murky synth tritone:

GRITOS EN LA LUZ DE LA LUNA.

Motorcycling in sketchy black nights where the single eye of a headlight peers through translucent into the unending inkwell. Lots of quick panning shots following the motor-bound, helmeted killer. He brandishes a butcher knife in his left as the right keeps a steady hold on the bike.

There is not a single line of dialogue in the film; not even the victims utter a single line besides their screams. This is a pure splatter film: no dialogue, no plot—nothing in the way of pure, unadulterated bloodshed.

The killer catches up to another motorcyclist on the highway, cutting to a front-facing shot of him raising the cleaver, doing that pan-zoom thing that you see so often in Polizochettsi films, focusing on the cleaver just before he strikes, the reflection of the frightened motorist in the gleam. Squelching sounds follow a deluge of rubber limbs, flood of bright crimson. The bodies slump over the wheel, and the motorcycle crashes. The killer speeds on headlong into the infinite night.

Soon he disembarks and walks over to the beach, himself rendered little more than a monstrous black thing *among the cold waves lapping up against the shore. The killer retrieves an axe, and with one swift swoop decapitates a blonde he was chasing after, her head landing on the sand and staring out blankly into the disparate sea. The camera lingers on this composition for a period before an abrupt cut switches to another scene; a workman's contemplative.*

He chases down another who seeks refuge in a chapel, but finds her and pushes her through the stained-glass. She crashes into the street, dead, millions of broken shards piercing her.

There are a few more killings that follow this prototypical stalk-chase-kill formula until the film drastically switches in tone, ceasing to be a mindless amalgam of destruction and inverting instead into a schizophrenic mind-melt, a post-psychedelic burnout that feels like inhabiting the internality of the killer himself—dollar-store Dostoyevskian. I presumed this was the 30-minute mark where the cut Dave saw was cut-off, because I hadn't heard about anything like this:

The sea turns into a perturbing swirl of crimson while the moon

flickers how an eye blinks, the screeching of seagulls oscillate with hauntingly cheap analog synths, replacing the digital sterility of the Cassio; one gets the feeling of a malevolent demiurge watching over this stretch of the film; the killer is no longer a drone but rather a conduit of a higher power, brutally murdering innocents if only to reach some form of rest within sacrifice, to slake the insatiable bloodlust of a celestial being. What were once washed-out colors are now brimming with a reinvigorated palette and dripping in visceral hues. The mic clips frequently with guttural screams set to scenes of self-mutilation in a room whose sole fixture is a lightbulb dangling from a cord always buzzing, always filling the room with its angry piss-yellow glow—a constructed reality, the brutalist beat of a murderer unable to do anything but remain a puppet. The film becomes increasingly obsessive, repeatedly focusing on small, insignificant things within the periphery: the accidental freeze on half of a woman's eyeball; a fly crawling within a filth-ridden urinal; a bottle of cheap liquor shattered like shrapnel wetting the thirsting concrete in an alleyway. Whole sequences start

without a character in sight, only for the actors to pop in and out as if they were running late for another scene; the collective empty of the city where it was shot starts to make itself known in these filmic apparitions and errata, eerie in its utter desolation; victims leave behind a hand or a head floating in midair, screaming—blood dripping from nonexistent sources. The pacing starts to increase rapidly, almost uncontrollably: handheld shots twist and turn, tracking shots speed up like a rollercoaster, repetitions of scenes spliced together form rude visual chords. This was a film converging in on itself, simultaneously imploding and exploding and taking us along for the ride. Staccato on the synths with endless screaming, the gore repetitive like a barbaric, shamanistic ritual, bodies forming and recomposing only to be destroyed, decomposed, and slain completely once more. It was as if the walls of my mind were starting to collapse. Whole storylines organically mutate into a film where nothing happens on principle except constant violence—my sole emotion fear with a propulsive, pounding constancy; thousands of characters appear and dissolve; frames stack on top of each other, creating an interweave of parts of numerous layers, until finally the madness reached fever pitch, and my eyes rolled into the back of my head, my mind irreparably destroyed by the sheer density of calculation it had to undertake in order to comprehend anything that had happened.

I lay collapsed on the floor for who knows how long until I felt the shattered pieces of my psyche being pulled back together by a lulling sort of sound, this audiovisual pulse, an intensive throb like a second heart that wasn't pushing oxygen into my brain but had the same effect. The screen had calmed down, the screaming stopped, the gore had ceased to flow.

Now there was only a hypnotic sort of *beating, beating, beating*, like the stirrings of a neon heart fading in and out.

I looked at the blank screen and started to hallucinate, my fractured mental state projecting its own images onto the screen which were then being reinterpreted by my senses, re-apprehended into my mind over and over again. The other two guys were still there, not having moved an inch from their chairs, but in the same state that I was in. They left after two hours, I think; my mind still hurts a little.

I opened my phone and went straight to Letterboxd.

In a schizophrenic blur my fingers moved while my eyes failed to slow down and parse any form of individual motion. After ten minutes of typing I looked back at my review, and something deep inside me told me that it was the best piece I had written so far:

Don John

Lost.

(5 stars and a heart) watched by **Dav Y. Jones** 13 Dec 2022

I would brutally murder and bury a family of three if I could get the full cut of this/a VHS rip. Hit me up if anyone has any more details on whatever the hell this thing is.

(1/2 stars) watched by **The New Bev** 10 Oct 2023

ok so not really my thing tbh but the killer was SOOOO hot!! Loved the dog too ofc but not the fact that he got killed off :(the killer is literally me (him when he's running after that one girl with the bleach-blonde hair) when I'm doing cardio! How about stalking ME next time hmmmm???

---

watched by **Magikarp**

An editor friend of mine was able to piece together the thirty-minute cut that's been going around here and there with a rare work print he happened to find inside an ancient projector he bought while he was in Spain at a flea market.

Nothing really compares. He's charging a hundred bucks per rental for the beast, and I can definitely say it's worth it. Contact me if you're interested. I can work things out with him for you.

(five stars and a heart) watched by **Donovan R.**

! "#$% %&'%(!%)*%+ ,-.!/ #.% %*0.#&^####(((((((((

(2 likes)

dead los angeles

The lady-of-the-night's body hung upon the neon crucifixion of the JESUS SAVES sign as I stood from a distance, as if to evaluate it the same way one observed a work of fine art. We framed the scene in its invisible background, the surrounding darkness negating any form of controlled space: Maria and her cross seemed to make all of the night conform to them, and to them alone, all shadow and light sculpted into their singular form like some grand tenebrist statement swaddled in the folds of cheap fluorescence. Yellow light struck her grand-piano cheekbones like some ethereal makeup, ink-spilt hair bleeding into such sweet obscurity, and her shocked visage was wide-eyed and beautiful.

I resisted the urge to kiss those cold, dead lips in this cold, dead city.

Jo'nathan motioned with the camera, holding just enough film-stock to last us the night. I nodded, and he deftly plotted out the perspective and adjusted for the lighting, making small adjustments like a proper tradesman. The trigger was pulled—Maria on her cross was enveloped in a burst of white light, and in the split-second flash vanished like some Houdini-girl, leaving not a single trace but the evidence of her photo. I was pleased; my associate had the steady touch of a builder, not the mindless breeze of an artist.

We hailed a cab, speeding down an infinite amount of white lines like a businessman snorting snow as we floated through the somnambulist city, our eyes swimming in seas of reds and yellows and greens, from the aged neon of night-clubs down to the cheap fluorescence of convenience stores. Rot and anxiety gasped faintly from the filth-spattered streets like a white-washed sepulcher, like the cloying stench of a prostitute's *parfum noir*.

With a cassette pressed soft into the flesh of the stereo the lonely squealing of free jazz seeped into the palliative atmosphere like morphine, soundtracking coldly the city. It began to rain heavily, steam hissing from the warm pavement conjuring phantasms in dead air, merging with a dispatch of smoke that ran from the driver's side as the junked cruiser slid off slowly into eternal night disappearing into naked fog.

You don't mind, do you? the cabbie asked, smoke exhaling from deep within his lungs like a living thurible.

No, my friend, I responded, not at all, and in turn he gave us hand-rolled cigarettes of a distinctive Arabian blend, and soon all three of us were all lost in a trance, in this city that had lost itself in itself.

Collective amnesia; that was our job; Jo' already had the entirety of Washington, D.C. in a scrapbook and I but a few scraps of Seattle and New York, mementoes more than anything else.

I beheld the last nights of cafes and bars ready to be demolished, a monumental club or even a particular night's autumnal crescent glow, and my second hand was tempted to roll out the line of film as we accelerated like a rubber band through the narrow streets, erasing them as we rode on. But I checked the passion of my fellow man, placed a gentle hand against that ruinous desire that so afflicts us all.

The urge to destroy is a creative urge, he spoke gently, and I reminded him softly but firmly that such destruction with a simple urge is no true destruction at all: we are precise, clean, goal-oriented preservationists. Let us not forget that, *let us not forget who we are*.

The driver pulled over to a grindhouse showing a triple feature of half-hearted *giallo*. The reels spooled out slowly, methodically like spider's webs, weaving in on each other and cocooning us into its high European strangeness. *America is a new land*, I thought to myself, *with new worries—we have only faint demons of old*. Once the projector stopped illuminating properly, though, the celluloid caught on fire, the reels melting into oblivion with us being the last true witnesses of their existence.

What a holy and awful experience, I thought, *to have to carry this within me*.

I feel sick, I said to my compatriot, *let's get out of here,* and like rats we scurried out into the cauldron of August's sweet sticky night, diasporic this city of metaphysical divers defenestrated into intriguing and puzzling unknowns. Jo'nathan pointed his camera at the marquee, then the entire theater, as we made our exit, but I waved him off, promising better things soon to capture like butterflies pinned by silver.

Submerging ourselves into the metro station we navigated the labyrinthine pathways like some concrete nervous system, emanations of anxiety around us sparking electric. White lights in the tunnel illuminated the darkened car every now and then, flashing like disposable bulbs that documented the grisly details of a crime.

Some people stood alone and others held onto the handrails, a sacred few burying themselves into another, a lover or a stranger, sometimes one and the same. My partner's eyes looked as blank as the fluorescents carving the rails, sparking faintly with a minimum energy, fingers twitching and at-the-ready to pull the trigger like a soldier his rifle in an firing squad.

But wait, just wait.

The museum loomed monolithic over us, life absurd in the sheer scale of the manufactured. Together we went in to surreptitiously glance at the disconcerting melange of artwork in order to pinch a few Moderns for our collection.

The first thing to capture me was the reproduction of the original photograph taken of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain,* a piece made famous both by actuality and presentation: the prank, the novelty, the *blasphemy* struck onto the name of high art, like Lucifer gaining his infernal crown in the act of sinking to his furthest depths. I had to have it, reproduce it, sublimate it semiotically into the multitude of signifiers present.

Seize it! I whispered—greed throttling me with its sticky fingers wrapped around my eager neck. My co-conspirator configured the hunk of plastic and metal in obedience to my command, the glass case disappearing with the aforementioned photograph shot from a safe distance; these white walls held us safe. Confusion arose as simple as a look back, then security was brought around and yet we (now true thieves) were never caught. I kept the stolen issue close to my heart, in a breast pocket: instant development, instantaneous theft.

Nonchalant we rambled our way towards the exit, successfully deterring any form of suspicion—a rare pleasure captured within us, like a golden bird weeping in her crystal cage. We cackled like witches, the crescent moon shining down sharply upon us like a scythe. Vice, vice, oh sweet *vice*—the Devil himself had us in his hold. We felt vicious, but a fleeting feeling of viciousness as dusk's dim dust settled over us like statues of bone and skin, so we, too, would come to be buried underneath the distinctive apathy of the city.

We walked on, letting the flickering neon guide us in this spiritual exercise or exorcism in psychogeography, going only where the light damned our paths shining brazenly before us like electric tongues of Pentecostal fire. Palm-trees grew rubberized and possessed by desperate yearnings, the sandy yawn of nightlife stretched into infinity horizons, In-And-Out Burgers strewn across the desert facade like pillboxes in the war-torn and desolate beaches of Normandy.

Jo' and I were hungry, and so we stopped inside.

Over ketchup packets and specialty menu items we witnessed the grand heat-death of the universe, occasionally pausing to sip our sodas out of a deathly thirst. Lonesome waves curled where phantoms crested the tops, hallucinations of legends after rubbing eyes too much in

stimulant-deprived states. Red-and-white scheme, the burnout inherent, a sign blinking wearily as if it too needed sleep like the rest of us, casino rollers running down-and-out of the strip, the plastic abandon…

In-And-Out was 2 a.m. despair, the screaming and wailing, a red-eyed wake-up call to get the hell out of there: to sink into that molded seating and to feed a different impulse of your animal nature. Here lies the city limits, the limits of existence, that disparate stretch that extended into a celestial highway, where I was to ride out on once my mission on this perishable, temporal plane was over.

far-out trip, man, a local teahead caught my inner monologue turned outer, and I gave him a knowing signal to approve of his approval. I gestured vaguely to my associate—*let's ride.*

And so we journeyed on.

The desert highway was colder than a death-ray, carrion strewn about and the bones of ancient deities perhaps poking around just as well, waiting for someone to come too close or perhaps even to just worship—then the eye of eternity would be shown through the hollow skull of an animal's carcass while imbibing peyote, a bouquet for the divine where the yawn of the blacktop ran *ad infinitum/ad absurdum/ad nauseam.*

Before too long hinted beacons of pink murmured through the funeral smog, a peek through ethereality into a true eternity. Brushing back the curtain-like smoke revealed the urban ache of a construction site, pillars of disoriented steel like altars to a god of the forge reaching towards a disinterested sky arranged almost like Stonehenge.

The light-cherry blush came from the warning lights strewn about and the site peered out into the river, slicing the city in half, shimmering hollow and enigmatic like a monstrous tub of gelatin; the smell of oil and gasoline mixed with the salty breathe of the sea pregnant with the weight of a thousand corpses. The neon gasps couldn't touch this site, neither could those plastic hearts and Day-Glo wedding chapels.

We were far from the empty, perfumed seduction of faux-Playboy models stripping their skin and peeling themselves bare across gilded avenues paved with excrement, with daiquiris in Barbie-doll hand; this existed on its own, distanced from any artifice and shrouded in its own cold beauty.

Jo'nathan hesitated, fingers shy in the wake of industrial beauty.

Are some things to be left to themselves? Monuments to others like us, believers of the Real and of the Concrete? Does their absence signify their existence?

I was not a philosopher; neither of us were. And so we left, disappointed by a beauty we could not capture, impotent in the face of an earthy divinity—such that was manmade yet bestowed upon us by some higher power. We went back into the bleeding heart of the city, lost angels in the wake of some unknown funeral, wishing to expire like the ashes of burnt pyres.

Caskets surrounded us everywhere, dead arms pulling metal ones, fish-eyes staring at bluffing hands with the other holding free martinis, cigarette-stubs wrinkled and the visors teeming with curled white hairs like rancid milk, those elusive visions of jackpot like the ecstasy of a saint, flagellation as much as maxing out your credit card. But St. Anthony dared not throw himself into the surrounding skyscraper-cacti in this absinthe swelter for a penitent-hermetic fix, readymade and rubber-made.

Organicity substituted for orgasmicity, false positives filling the negatives of our *fotoscrap* as we picked our ephemera carefully, blessing it with an existence far beyond the grave. We looked not for dead souls but dead objects.

Daybreak was soon approaching, and like vampires the creeping light righteously burned us, made us wish to bury ourselves in deep crypts within the spiraling intestines of long forgotten crumbling castles. But I resisted, and my partner did as well.

Our roll was very nearly out, purple-orange sores infecting the open air as the sun gouged the atmosphere with shanks of light. But we had to finish, to win those last few shots so precious and brilliant in the lustful madness of rosy-teared dawn, and our chance was so serendipitously bestowed upon us in the form of a drifting advertisement, like a sheet-ghost, for some warehouse rave-club in the outskirts—the wild-west temporal that existed only in those sandy throes, desiccated and separated from beach proper.

The doors pulsated, metal framework writhing like the passions of a violent, jealous lover, the whole skeleton of the building shaking with a certain psychic energy as the hi-hat pulsation and bass throb lured us into throwing those barn-doors back and casketing ourselves into the Rave Of Amontillado, surrounding us with practitioners of such basic alchemy—the synthesis of acid into hallucinations of limitless craft. Red and blue lights pumped hard and fast like amphetamines through visual bloodstreams, wisps of samples reverberating ghostlike throughout the club as every single patron experienced some form or another of manufactured gnosis.

The DJ, sprawled out on the stage with a tab accustomed to each eye, was peering into strange and sublime dimensions previously unknown, screaming out of the agony of having the juice dissolved on his retinas, or of the great and terrible and pure and unadulterated stream of knowledge that poured into his mind like a funnel. The phosphorescent convergence sometimes ran cautious shades of purple like lamplights seen in the abyss of suburban carparks and lost highways that reminded one of bacterial cleansers, blacklight exhibitionism, or what the color of libidinal energy might be.

But orgonic expression was not the happening tonight; this was not an orgy of the flesh but an orgy of the mind, tangential thoughts trespassing into the grid-patterns of the square ceiling-tiles trepanning naked skulls over dance-flooring. Some wild-eyed seer was carting supply up and down the aisles like a mountebank, offering spreadsheets of snow, pills, snortables and sniffables and smokeables, readymade injections; all that was sugar and light, to the most mind-crushing of *malleus maleficarum*, flashing the goods to psychic love-children in his velour trench-coat fashioned from the very color of orange.

Referring to himself as the Milkman we pilfered through his storied wares, grinning as if he earned a sheer contact high from the experience. I whispered to him—a whisper turned to a shout turned to a yelling match—and his bright-eyes stared at me and he mixed a drug cocktail like a crack physician, brewing us something that no proper script could buy and no proper pill-popper would take on their life.

I CALL THIS ONE FLASH, he yowled into eager ears, ourselves drinking up every syllable in uncut curiosity. We turned to the bathroom stalls for refuge, a veritable free-for-all of all sexes, genders, shapes.

Around us interested parties formed; perhaps more clientele for the Milkman. He collected empty bottles in the form of used syringes and gave us the first-time user's courtesy of a clean needle, and as we slapped our veins to bulge the sharp slid in like a metal thorn. We began to feel the warmth of liquid sunshine circulating through our veins; but this wasn't heroin, or at least it was too *cheap* for decent smack, and as the curious mix worked within our systems as we went back to the dance-floor our ocular sense began to strain and tremble, anticipating the deluge of new visions yet to come like the shudders of a mystic before she ascends into rapture.

First Jo'nathan began to go at the St. Vitus Dance, a controlled flagellant's flail, and then I started to move around, a movement on the

cellular level that was Cartesian in essence: a true separation of body and mind; our heads became disembodied appendages floating like balloons around the club, true receptors of all things in this universe. Pure colors and pure schemas and pure persons and pure souls became apparitions unto us, a million little carnivals of Platonic form.

I saw Jo's body move atavistically to the liquid, sterile groove, mechanic in its grace yet animalistic in being; my own reverted to mating rituals like cave-paintings, tribal movements buried deep inside a shared genetic lineage that went back to Genghis Khan and even further to the settler natives of original homelands previously uninhabited.

Our mouths moved wordlessly, grunting in odd, clandestine communication that it seemed only the other could properly understand. I saw Jo's energy, his 'floating head' manifest as pure light, and I signaled to him telepathically in order to observe more properly our primordial natures.

Our disembodied souls were bemused, like tourists at a zoo watching the monkeys engage in interpersonal social activities, wondering if there was truly something beyond instinct that drove them to mate, talk, eat, fight. But the more we watched them, the more they seemed to be able to perceive us, as if their physical nature somehow allowed them to feel some sensation of the supernatural; in some anthropological studies, in fact, there were research papers devoted solely to the instances where the human of pre-lingual civilizations recorded pictorially the instances of seeing "ghosts" or recognizing spirits.

Jo'nathan's body's hands, now rendered to the crude imitation of a caveman's, tinkered with the complex technological advancement of photo-taking, and its curious digits pressed buttons and fiddled with dials—then, without warning, and as if with premonition from the conduct of a future society, caught us in our very gaze with that same blinding white flash we so utilized on our adventures, and before we knew it we became the snapshots we sought to collect.

We became enveloped within a colorless void, no hint of frame nor boundary that could stop us from wandering in this snow-sanded desert; boundaries gained a true infintessence, and all that was physical and concrete in this world had been ruthlessly, irrevocably snatched away from us, leaving Jo'nathan and I only our own company as spirits lifeless within a new eternity while the physicality and likeness of our dissociated consciousness rested like the unchanging posture of wax corpses in a photograph.

$@¡NT ÆNTHØNɎ'S F[IR]£

Artificial moonlight pierced rotting boards ran ragged across black holes of bedroom windows, fluorescent shards of white disfiguring the dusty portraiture of a dead wife as @#$%^& groaned in his sleepless wake.

The tenement had a peculiar hexagonal shape, which he observed as he tried to reorient his vacuous mental state to some simulacrum of intelligent movement; in the throes of a particularly bad hangover the room felt less like an apartment and more like a giant centipede's tomb.

@#$%^& decidedly felt less than human.

Long, pale arms stretched out blindly into the void. Crocodile eyes, aged premature, peered outside the coffin and spilled out onto the dead, labyrinthine streets—each turn another puzzle the man couldn't find his way out of.

He turned his gaze back to his prison and felt around the wallpaper until he happened upon a rusted keypad, and with a metallic screech his vestiture and tools were dutifully brought forth, the sacrificial particulars of a pagan.

Fumbling in the shadowy haze he got dressed, eyesight failing while objects blended and merged together until he nearly forgot the spatial limitations of things existing within reality. @#$%^& groped for a fresher pair of eyes, provided to him as a work expense, and blindly replaced his sight, newly disoriented.

For dress: his usual beggar's rags that hung off him like like the entrails of midnight. For carry: an arsenal of spring-loaded knives tucked away in the folds of his robe, a medium-sized katana, an electromagnetic mace. He slipped into a subway car.

The subway, or at least what was left of it, housed every kind of degenerate cult imaginable, from technoflesh purists to flagellant fetishists, with @#$%^& observing the filth from the tier-three seat he snatched in the decrepit multilayered car, electro-tribalists clanging hollow metal chests in primal rhythm. The nodding heads of druoids peeked out from within various compartments fast asleep—their belief was that this form of contact with machine brought some form of sacred schizgnosis, yet as many went napping next to frayed wires their circuits were inevitably fried, overloading their processing systems with textgoric transmissions.

The shining chrome alongside the stink of rotted flesh accompanied the Sinpielists, a particular cult who believed the body was little more

than an impure carcass that impeded communication with the Great Machinist, thus improving the signals by stripping their skin and welding onto the newly-exposed area perfected alloys, mouths protruding from faces without eyes nor noses. @#$%^& always shuddered a little when he noticed the telltale welding glow emanating from dark alleyways—barely clandestine rituals happening just beyond one's sight.

The lowest variant of being were considered simple mutants borne of nuclear wastelands, or 'upgradees,' who could only get cheap aftermarket parts for their decaying mortal husks instead of downloading their consciousnesses onto a fresh corpse, or getting official cybernetic implants; @#$%^& himself was an upgradee, a factory worker caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

A billion other bizarre and deranged subclasses of subhuman roamed the enigmatic, twisting city—too many to properly categorize or mention. Normal hadn't existed in a while; you were either a freak with good money, or street trash in the eyes of the populace. As it was with any other civilization present in this foul year of Our Lord 3497, greed was the only status symbol left in a world left to rot into obscurity.

He pondered while this buried in the white din of the subway, the voices getting louder and louder and not only the ones present in the ca; @#$%^&'s mind felt like a tidal wave of radio static, crashing and spilling into an endless sea of noise. Like acid flashbacks, previous hallucinations, good and bad, shimmered through his memory bank crystalline as the car rattled and careened on electromagnetic rails. The mace tingled with an uncertain, nervous energy.

The body of the subway spilled out into the paranoid city of eternal night, a place ever-infested by the roach-like masses. Electronic eyes scanned around never blinking twice; unknowable figures ducked and hid around the myriads of monoliths of dulled Day-Glo cement and steel; biocops analyzed every last article of detritus for another body they could possibly dragnet and decommission for spare parts—meat or metal.

@#$%^& felt the collective loathing of this city like a sadist's hot breath against his neck panting warm in sharp corners and spiraling design, zig-zag inclines and declines—a creeping feeling he always got canvassing these cyberloin districts that the more he walked around, the more he felt like the designer *planned* it to be as alienating as possible.

Naturally it didn't help that there were about a thousand crooks, criminals, scum and slop who salivated at the chance of serving his head on a silver platter; his particular line of work demanded that everyone's blood painted his lapels.

He patched into the voices for details, for at least the bare minimum of information, before he set off once more into the void of the Electro-Sodom. @#$%^& pressed the TALK button at the back of his neck as if a human walkie-talkie, communicating telepathically to the guy(s) upstairs: *Who, What*, *Where,* and *Why*.

The *Why* was never needed, not necessarily, but he felt that it was better to kill a man for some reason than none at all, even if you yourself couldn't control the very fact that you were sent to put the guy on a slab in the first place. People always need a reason, even for the most horrific and unforgivable of acts and @#$%^& was no different.

The audio patched in oscillating and he winced at the piercing shrill, but after the godawful din the Operator's resonance rang in warm and clear:

*"All the dreck subhumanoid jamming the vision-ports of Bre/Tonic on the intersection of @@^^& and *#$!; around Teleflesh, and the body shops, you know the place; golden teeth of the owner, Genecyst; there's some bounty going around him for extortion and a couple of smaller charges—pig stuff."*

@#$%^& crept through the city with an intrinsic knowledge of the underworld better than a gentleman junkie, each crook and wall navigated with learned—forced—calm. Already the old juice was kicking into him as he marched on into the very depths of hell. He felt the scar on his head, his skull, the markings on his brain and the wires they connected in him, his mind throbbing like a madman was chopping up his cerebrum into tiny little pieces.

On the way over @#$%^& saw through the blinds over Teleflesh a glimpse of some holographic prostitute displaying multidimensional and therefore impossible acts of sexual depravity so realistic that you could feel every sensation, as well as their reaction to you. But at the end of the day the john's grabbing handfuls of light, telling himself its ass.

He walked on.

There were memory drives (still an analog operation—that's how ancient the place was) where you could tap into any make or manner to apply to your personal illusion. Some brought ex-girlfriends to life, ex-wives, friends, bosses and many more doppelgänger women, some that never existed in the first place, in a desperate bid to slake their loneliness —some of the 'creations' he spotted before had resembled old fertility cult statues.

But it was never enough: the typical Teleflesh clientele, for the most part, never went to any place where the girls were actually *real*. In a

brothel, at the very least, you could confide in the fact that the girls, no matter how genetically or cybernetically altered they were, were *real*, and you could actually touch them; they had emotions and thoughts and hopes and desires just like anybody else.

The projected images, in contrast, were soulless, devoid of true personality, the endgame of simulacra where you don't even care if it's the real thing or not.

The flesh markets were running hot tonight: mutants stalked out like bitches in heat, cops trying to get tricks turned for free, metal-men looking for someone to warm their digitized hearts. Furs swam through an endless sea of hungry mouths and licking lips, grabbing whomever they could get their hands on; it was an unholy feeding frenzy and no one was going to leave unsatiated.

A Japanese girl with four breasts and whitewashed with an American accent propositioned, her face-veil hiding a jaw like a snake's with a tongue almost as long, with which she waved seductively as she passed by, and another, a *Venus noir*, detached her head, the disembodied pate winking and blowing a kiss. Every kind of girl was tailor-made and engineered for pure fantasy, blatant fetish on display like a parade for all to see, pick-and-choose like cuts of meat at a butcher's.

@#$%^& spotted a beggar trying to pawn off his own heart, and dropped a few coins into his jar, maybe out of some kind of karmic instinct. He looked up—he'd just arrived at the joint, his fingers already aching out of habit, his flesh so eager to fulfill a habitual duty his mind so vehemently despised: the marquee for Bre/Tonic flashed, a vertical holoboard projected and stretching out infinitely upwards.

He phased through the plasma membrane serving as a door as security was generally loose around these parts, every-man-for-himself as common law.

Rejected experiments, biological malformations, and lifeforms of varying biological and technological ill-repute all plugged in with antiquated cables like the red and white ones used to connect cathode-ray televisions, some utilizing their eye-sockets as female ends letting the current run directly through their cerebral cortex. A few lay with their limbs disconnected and their minds dissociated, detachable parts scattered across the filthy orange shag carpeting and soaking in a pool of electrical fluid, letting the connection spark through each and every part separately—those users swore it made for a better experience. Others lapped up the stuff like it was acid, wide eyes strained arabesques of

burst blood-veins. One hooked himself to an intravenous drip, rotting bedside completely opiated on the chemical.

@#$%^& cruised in and slipped to the back, where the brain tumor-like connection terminal stood pulsating and glowering, a mess of veins pumping streams of data into the million wires running wild and infesting the mental circulation of every single user, all fifty of them hooked up.

Calmly, he slid the mace out from under his bilious cloak and tore savagely at the great, cancerous mass, spikes pounding tender flesh as it spurted, bleeding an iridescent lavender fluid—the purest essence of information leaking into the overworld now exposed and without proper conduit, wasted and left to form puddles on the dirty ground as a sticky handful of the underground's worst were starting to wake up blank and raving mad, cut off from their supply.

Within a minute's notice all eyeballs—synthetic, electronic, organic and otherwise—came to be fixated on him; it was a psychic whirlpool of bad vibes; the living dead come to collect from the living.

@#$%^& muttered to himself cold and hollow with a concurrent burn in his veins—a rush conjured up entirely within the strange confines of his mind, a euphoric chill that wired him into it and really brought him into his own system. Now it was time for a different puppet to get his strings plucked by another master, this bastard Pinocchio come to life.

Dirty nails began to grasp for a weapon, groping a hidden knife, to wrench the piping straight off the wall.

The slack began to tighten.

The mass started to crowd around, teeth bared and eyes glassy.

The puppeteer raised his hand.

@#$%^& backed out slowly, fiends drooping against the door and slouching towards him menacingly. Noting that the mace was still against the back-wall he slid out the katana from its sheath like a wind-up samurai, waiting for that perfect moment where trouble breaks out swarming and biting like a broken hive of mad wasps.

Surrounded by the complete dregs of humanity—the collective Id incarnate that stained the already-filthy streets—he once more felt the old monkey crawling back on his back. His skin felt
prickly. The warmth of the neurological manipulation, coupled with spiraling feelings of dread at what he was about to do, ran like counterpoint to each other, his heart galloping mad rhythms, his blood boiling equal parts pain and pleasure.

He couldn't hold back any longer; the instinct to tear everything to shreds overwhelmed him as his hands started to move beyond their control.

Pouncing like a jackal @#$%^& mercilessly tore through the first mark he saw with a sharp slice, and turning around shaved the flesh off of a score of stragglers—the sight of whose freshly-faceless visages both revolted and delighted their assailant. He skewered indiscriminately, hacking and slashing through them all as if they were jungle brush, showers of crimson raining down upon the forsaken masses, chopping up all the underworld into spare parts.

He was in the pocket, a rhythm coursing through his veins, and it felt so damn good that he desperately wanted to go on killing the whole night.

They followed the assassin as he led them into the obscurity of the night, and, thief-like, stole away, only to reappear from impossible non-spaces, junkies gargling their own teeth screaming at the sight of Death's scythe gleaming upon them in those flowing beggar's rags. Torrents of switchblades flew through the air, streets bursting dripping red and painted all moribund colors by insides turned out.

The high wore off slowly, surely, a halo-like glow surrounding @#$ %^&'s sight in the wake of the open-air slaughterhouse as he stood panting in everyone else's bodily fluids. He smelt a tomb.

He stumbled back panting into Bre/Tonic, ragged and worn, bleeding in far too many areas to count but making sure to drag his mace from the floor.

A placard shone darkly at the end of the hallway, reading *OWNER*, and kicking tin he door revealed an agape, drooling Genecyst, right in the middle of getting delirious off his own supply. @#$ %^& yanked out the wires, the pusher jolting from his disturbed high, receiving in return a single, white-eyed glimpse of his killer, mace thrust in mid-swing aimed at that golden smile that once beamed cheap and glaring like an electric sun.

@#$%^& rattled the set in a pill container like coins in a piggyback jar—a quaint reminder of a time when people cured medical disorders rather than prescribed them.

Walking around the mute city, he spied a smear of graffiti (the real stuff—not the paltry holographix garbage that stores and plainclothes peddle to kids so they won't have to clean up afterwards), freshly

dripping from a grey concrete wall—a mortuary slab that read, "BLOODLUST IS AN AMERICAN VIRTUE".

He threw his rags out into the alley and burned them as an exorcism of sorts; the smoke dragged throughout the corridors and around the corners like incense, cosmically purifying all it touched like a karmic funeral pyre. The fire licked his face, illuminating his stony visage blood-streaked and gore-stained, eyes like an angel's trapped in the body of a Lucifer.

Lights kept on flashing, holograms kept on functioning, air kept on being breathed, but there was nobody, really, to keep the globe revolving as it should—but technology would fix that problem soon; a pure automation upheld by an inorganic Atlas, one truly godlike and yet less than man.

The sparks that once electrified @#$%^&'s mind had now fully abated, and the night had begun to show its true color in the absence of life as he slipped in some soma-like music.

The scaffolding stretched along the stars like the skeletons of Titan robots, the buildings surrounding sleek-black and dim as if serving for their obelisk. Eyes closed, the industrial pound and hammer emanating from his cassette wrought metropolises, chalk-marks of new Romes and Tokyos and New Yorks all collapsing and rearranging and forming and building into each other—the clanging steel with synth-pulse like the biorhythm of some lonely android canvassing the same city.

Hover-taxis flew by in yellow blurbs and blurs, headlights blinking empty within unoccupied streets with not a single human in them, not even a driver. Right around this witching hour, from two A.M. until six, everything became a ghost of itself, hollow signifiers pointing to something known only by its absence. The cathode-ray burn signage of *Ellipsis* seared his vision fresh, a bar that had no proper sign: the marquee was a confusion of ever-changing symbols, branding themselves into his psyche as he walked on, journeyed into the mist at the edge of the city, disappearing completely—if, only, for the night.

He was nothing more than a phantom, a specter, an urban ghost story, a portent; life had become the mere absence of death. Perhaps he, eventually, would begin to fade, drifting off into and comprising the ether that shrouded the city.

As he walked through the funerary fog, he hallucinated the visages of past marks, the passing shades that had haunted him for as long as he could remember.

These weren't induced hallucinations, but natural ones.

The bodies swept and were carried along by the wind, dissipating as quickly as they formed, and @#$ %^& cursed his immortality, wishing that he himself could join the enviable ranks of the deceased.

There were ghosts ruminating just on the edge, but the city itself was of the living dead.

deliverance

Stretched over like the ribs of a beached whale, the slightly Baroque skeleton of the cathedral's interior curved and arched around the stone walls. At this nocturnal hour, no light pierced through the stained glass fixtures of gruesome martyrial fascinations; instead, glimmers of candlelight illuminated the cold visages of the surrounding enormous marble statuary, whose unchanging gaze was almost as freezing as this very Walpurgis night. And it was this inquisitional, tenebrous glow that tempted all manners of murderers and thieves to falsely prostrate themselves upon the sacred floors of this house of God, as a last-ditch effort to evade the snaking tendrils of the law whose shadows appeared like omens against the sacred walls.

Greeted first by the hegemonic structure of the gates of heaven, purgatory and hell within the entrance of the cathedral, the murderer known as *El Brazo* (on account of his right hand being mashed and limp from a nasty run-in with the law) tried his best to blend in with the dour, sacerdotal atmosphere as blood gushed from his abdomen like uncorked wine. He tried to hide the fatal wound as he seated himself at a pew—his lips writhing faithlessly in simulacrum of prayer, his hands twisted in empty piety.

His fame was accumulated more from good looks and charismatic behavior than barbaric acts of violence that warranted his arrest; El Brazo's immaculately tan face shone gloriously and abhorrently as it basked in the candlelight, surrounded by an encroaching emptiness within the massive church; his was a face that would drive any sane man to forgive him, and already he had charmed his way out of so many troubles—tonight would be no different.

Near unconscious from the amount of blood loss, the murderer was jolted out of his sleep as the organist laid his bony fingers into the ivory of the organ, conjuring up a ghostly brass-choir, and the congregation stood and began to sing the opening hymn for the Saturday midnight vigil. Not wanting to appear suspicious, Brazo stood up and followed the cues as best he could from the rest of the church as the priest began to officiate the mass.

Father Enteró stood at the pulpit to deliver the homily, a stout bullet of a man—five-foot with a face shrunken and shriveled like a witch-doctor cast a curse on it, tar-colored hair slicked against his skull like amniotic fluid over a newborn. He waddled as opposed to walked, and,

from some old condition or accident, no longer had the capability of sight.

The blind priest deftly navigated the constraints of the church nevertheless, and most parishioners said that he had a supernatural knowledge of direction; very rarely did he use a cane. El Brazo found it hard to commit his attention to the mass, but something that went beyond the rough-carved looks of the priest made him focus as if his eyelids were nailed open. Father cleared his throat and began his homily:

"My dear brothers and sisters. Today, I would like to talk to you about something rather controversial in the teachings of the church: the psalms of King David are often used for the Responsorial, and yet so many parishes of our tradition shy away from using those which focus on the death and destruction of the enemy; the ones which speak of bloodshed, divine revenge."

His face shifted to an emotion that was hard to read.

"Still, we must not forget that it is precisely *these kinds of passages which deserve our attention. It is not purely for the execution of our enemies that David wrote these passages, but more as a warning against all those who oppose God, that they will be made nothing in His sight; it is paramount we see that when we sin, especially mortally, it is* we *who are the enemy. Forget not these words I say to you, that whomever strikes down the righteous, and lays traps in their path—they shall be ensnared by their own scheming."*

The priest bowed his head in meditation, ending his homily in preparation for communion. Mass ended soon after, and El Brazo used the pew as a shield to cover himself from any passer-by who might recognize him from the papers.

Strangely, all the faithful walked by and not a single person recognized him nor greeted him, as if he were invisible. But there was one person who could see him perfectly fine, and Father Enteró swiftly went up to the man as El Brazo laid cowering half-underneath the wooden fixtures. The priest laid a soft hand on his shoulder:

"*¿Mi hijo, por qué te escondes ti mismo antes del Señor?* Come child, there is nothing to fear in this house of God."

And so the priest offered the murderer a small smile while the murderer thought of ways to get rid of the priest so that he could shelter in the church, unbothered for the night. Father Enteró offered to guide him through the cathedral, and once again, having no other choice without seeming suspicious, El Brazo dutifully agreed.

"Tengo que decir, tu sermón estaba muy interesante. I'm quite interested to hear you speak more on this subject of the wicked." His wolf's teeth gleamed sharply in front of the blind man of God, and with his good hand El Brazo quietly fished for the razor stored in his right pocket, keeping an attentive ear—for indeed, he was truly interested.

The priest smiled.

They walked through the aisles, and around them, pausing at times from their theological discussion to admire and discuss the various Goyas, El Grecos and Velázquezes scattered throughout in the humble side-chapel that stood as the weary bastions of an aged-vintage faith, the mummifications of a slow-beating heart.

The two walked slowly, leisurely, as the night darkened, and outside the neon lights burnt brightly, bars buzzed excitedly, and a myriad of lost souls were trying to make the streets their own if just for the night, and so the church was a shield against the modern world, a museum and a place of worship, a sanctuary or a stigma—but the deep stirrings of one wicked man dictated that this church was destined to become a sepulcher, and so El Brazo prepared the metal instrument as if tuning for a diabolical orchestra, grasping and groping it in his left hand and polishing the sides with his thumb and feeling it over like an artist with his brush right before the first stroke was to stain the canvas.

The murderer amiably hung his arm over the priest, dangling the razor just underneath his rubbery throat, making smaller and smaller conversation until the last word uttered would give him enough conviction to release the tether on which the soul of the priest floated—phrases and sentences hung like thieves on the gallows, each piece of dialogue becoming more and more like the particulars of a crime scene.

Ever so slightly did the razor twitch just underneath Father Enteró's chin, and El Brazo gripped the handle firm, prepared to slit the priest's throat—

"Estás familiar con el muerto de Judías?" the priest asked casually, but with a lurking gravity in his voice.

The murderer cocked his eyebrow, and replied *no*—the last word he'd uttered had lashed the rope of the guillotine and he was just about to sever the earthly ties of the man. But he paused to hear what he priest would say—not out of any particular kind of mercy, but out of sheer curiosity.

That particular look upon the priest's face that was hard to read washed over him once more.

"There are two traditional theories that explain the death of the traitor. The first one, which I'm quite sure you are familiar with, is that of his hanging."

El Brazo nodded, then remembered that this gesture was of little use to the blind priest.

"Well," he cleared his throat, "the more esoteric theory comes to us from a passage in Acts."

And he gave a small, strange sort of smile that made the murderer uneasy.

"Lo siento padre, pero tengo que ir," the murderer hastily replied, tripping over himself as he turned and started to walk back towards the entrance, slowly walking faster and faster.

He was running now in a cathedral that seemed to stretch on infinitely. His feet hurt. His ankles ached. His heart throbbed with blind doom.

The sightless man stared deftly at him, unsmiling, and El Brazo felt his gaze bearing down upon him as if the other knew something that he did not.

"*Allow me to refresh your memory then*," Father Enteró's voice reverberated with unnatural power as the murderer sprinted—he was almost to the door now, close to the gate of heaven and of hell and of purgatory.

The man of God produced a small, black bible, and, laying his fingers on the passages, read slowly but firmly, and with great dedication:

"Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out."

At this, El Brazo stopped suddenly; it was as if all of his weight had suddenly dropped out from him, and, looking down, saw that what the priest had read was not merely history, but rather prophecy. As his body, torn asunder, collapsed weightlessly before the gate, his gaze fell upon a white demon of the inferno, whose vicious grin was reified in white marble.

infinite regress

The sun grew weary on some vacuous dive east of nowhere as the divorce papers stood untouched by my signature, sticky with beer and lying in my suit-jacket's pocket.

I took them out every now and then, letting the ash falling from my cigarette obscure the print. It was one hell of a present—that much was certain, and it took all of ten years for someone to gift it.

I gazed into the bar-mirror—greasy film over the surface distorting my reflection, or maybe it was the drink—and the barmaid caught my eye as I signaled for another, flagging a fiver for beer. Sinking in my stool I let my eyes roll around the bar like marbles over the lovesickness of tears, cheap liquor, and sweat.

She set the glass before me. The beer tasted bitter.

A couple of scuzzy jazz cats found the space to moan and wail for the night's entertainment in the cramped dive with no breathing space, some disgraced lounge seductress singing as their frontwoman with sultry disinterest. Tone-deaf drunks crowded around me like I was their king and I let my ears be chewed up by their raw whiskey-breath running sordid, down-and-out tales as much as I could handle, but I got tired of it all pretty quickly. I rattled the change in my pocket, and decided to gamble it all on the pay-phone.

The booth reeked of wino piss—a glowering beacon surrounded by empty streets, illuminated by the burning red-blue glare of the neon-neglected bar. My warm breath became visible in the frigid air as, trembling, I held the yellow plastic receiver and looked around at the melange of visual detritus cluttering the walls.

I rummaged around for the coins, emptying a splash of change into the machine. The dial tone was expectant, knowing, wavering between heaven and hell.

The other end clicked.

A voice I'd once known, sharper now than any of Cupid's poisoned arrows, answered; she sounded weary, most likely having had been abruptly woken up by the persistent ring.

"*H-Hello?"*

"It's me, Sylvia."

"Frank?" She paused for a moment, then replied curtly: *"Hi."*

I fiddled around with the leftover nickels and dimes I had in my hand, as if searching for a poor box to offload the guilty silvers like they came straight from Judas's moneybag.

"Have you signed the papers yet?"

"Syl, you know I don't want to."

"I know, Frankie. I know. I'm sorry."

"If you're sorry you've sure got a funny way of *showing* it."

"*Don't* yell at me Frank— "

"I've never hurt *you*, never hurt our *daughter* . . . "

"It's not that, Frank—it was never that. You—you were a good husband . . . it's just that you needed to get some things sorted out . . . "

"Oh, ok, so what am I then—a junk drawer? I just need to be reorganized—that's it, right?—and *then* I'll be ok?"

I heard some rustling on the other end—something like a sigh. Something that spoke of a buried kind of love, the kind that'd lie awake some nights, sleep others, something that said, *I want you, honey, but you're damaged goods.*

And I could feel her cradling the receiver, cradling my voice against her neck like she could still feel my warm breath against her skin.

But what was between us was a quarter-mile and a decade of antidepressants, sleeping pills, and failed couple's therapy.

Insomnia brought me to Her bedside often when Sylvia and I were starting out, and I almost always thought about the possibility of our child inheriting my mental illness. Sylvia said she knew I wasn't all there when she started dating me, but that she didn't mind. She thought that love would fix our problems, that it could fix everything.

It's been apparent to me for quite some time now that there are wounds that love can't heal. Sylvia and I loved each other every single day as a *choice*, not a feeling, and yet it seemed that with every smile we plastered on our faces, we strained ourselves even more, little by little.

I remembered we were in the bathroom one time, getting ready to go out—our baby Annie safe with her sitter, the both of us in the finery of young lovers approaching their late-stage. She was applying the last bit of rogue to her cheeks as I combed my hair. And Sylvia looked at me, not directly, but at my reflection.

"*You know, darling,*" she spoke softly, but firmly. "*At times, I think of you like a piece of fine art: you're wonderful to look at, but hard to take home.*"

She didn't bother to clarify what she meant about that for the rest of that night, for the rest of our relationship, but I slowly came to understand that you have to forget a lot of little things like that, to forgive your partner and move on.

Now I understand much more clearly what she meant.

"Darling . . . " the telephone booth itself seemed to take pause, hesitating. " . . . *it's over.*"

Calmly, I replaced the phone back in its receptacle, letting the familiar analog click comfort me with the consolation that our conversation was over—would be over forever, and that after I signed the papers Sylvia and I would never see each other again.

I collapsed, sobbing hysterically; the tears were pouring out of me so rapidly that I believed if I stayed long enough in the booth I could very well drown.

They were the two most damaging words in the English dictionary. Two words that put a close on ten years like a house up for-sale.

My chest crumpled like a brown paper sack—the bottom soaked in the alcoholic contents it was hiding, shriveled and ready to discard; a man's impotence is best demonstrated in the face of a divorce order given by his wife.

I stumbled back into the familiar bar surrounded by freshly strange faces, feeling purged of any feeling whatsoever. I got myself a glass of whiskey and sat on the left side, where the band was playing at the very back, about ten feet from the musicians and the bathrooms.

The singer was really laying it into me, focusing all her shamanistic priestess energy on me—or as much as she could in this cramped, trashy setup—with eyeliner like red velvet and lips to match in a satin dress, pinning me down like a butterfly on cork with her sleazy, lounge lizard sexuality, and I couldn't care less.

Maybe two hours later, when the clock hit one, I quietly shuffled out to Harold And Kathy's, the perennial greasy spoon that dished breakfast no matter the day nor the hour. As I watched the stretch and crawl of shadows surrounding I realized that this town was turning sinister on me.

I took my refuge within the burnt-sierra tiling and the church-basement seating, ordering a steaming plate of biscuits and gravy alongside a black coffee to go along with a feverishly smoked and crumpled half-pack of Marlboros.

Most of the staff was playing poker in the back but I chatted up Jenny, the waitress matchstick-thin with frizzy auburn hair in a grease-stained smock. It was a dead night, so she wasn't too worried about a rush—*you're my sole customer*, she told me, and I chuckled, trying to hide the sadness in my eyes with laughter. Jenny asked about my wife, though, and all I could do was lay it all out for her.

She sat down and hugged me, long and tight, and said that if I ever felt lonely she'd keep her calendar open for me. I thanked her. She got up and told me that the place was closing down for good on the third of October. A lot of good things coming to an end.

Jenny went back to the kitchen to cook. I flipped a quarter while I waited, trying to drown myself in petty amusement until I could contemplate further the implications of the dissolution of my marriage, preferably in private.

I was still young, had a decent bit of charm, and didn't look too bad at that; thirty-two was a fine age for something like this.

The door chimed as the performers from the bar sat down for a meal, looking just as dead and hopeless as I was. Not a word passed between the three of them, and Jenny dragged a few of the staff from their poker game to help her attend to the customers—but not without some grumbling and compliant from the two chefs who were adamant that they were just about to win the pot: twenty bucks and a six-pack of Flying Dog.

Traffic lights bled into rain-slicked streets, the empty changing of colors like machinated mood shifts. Whole buildings lay enslaved within the weeping eyes of puddles: another world beckoning me to some place that I knew was no better than where I currently resided. I walked around the neighborhood with no destination in mind, only the knowledge that I wasn't going to be coming home tonight.

The houses sat patiently in rows with an openness that spilt out into the town, and I imagined them to be doll's houses: stable, unchanging, divorced from change given to chance. Their smiles were permanently painted on, never to frown. Happy houses. Here was my family. Here was my history. Here was my
future. And I was going to have to leave it all behind.

I sauntered through the empty minutiae of the town, catching the glint of the fading sign for a tool shop, the electric buzz of the downtown paved with streetlight. There was a roller rink a mile away that was converted from a strip club—mauve tint painted over the brick—and it was hard to tell if that was there before or after the renovation; three-fourths of a mile west would land you at a convenience store, with the rumor at the local college that there was a brothel on the second-story. If you wanted more southern charm, you could see burning crosses the size of skyscrapers peeking out of the blackened woods on certain nights.

At the chapel where we got married—a small, white-painted wooden affair—the lights stayed on throughout the night, being perhaps one of the only places to be open this late in this town that tucked in sundown. There were the gas stations and the two bars, sure, but everything else was shut off, save the mercy of God.

The doors creaked, hinges un-oiled, and the emptiness crept through my bones as I kneeled down on the wooden floors, prostrating myself before the altar.

My prayers, like a flood, came out of my mouth, drier than cotton, and after a half-hour in the pitch, save for the light of the crimson-glowering tabernacle candle, I left. The gap between air and structure widened as I made my exit, a giant moonbeam shining through and enshrouding the chapel in light as the building sat content in its monastic, tomblike silence.

I walked.

I got tired after a short while, though, and spotted the Twi-Lite Motel screaming VACANCY at me, the NO flickering like a superimposition over darkness; Schrödinger's Room.

The bed scratched me like a bramble-bush and was much better suited as a coffin; the bathroom held an unsettling beige accentuation stuck in the seventies, and I met a few roaches who were scuttling around my feet and through the shag-carpeting,
curious of their new visitor.

The window spilled out into the main road, a used car shop right in spitting distance illuminated by a sputtering road-lamp. The curtains fluttered from the slight breeze, flapping like sails to someplace far, far away from here—I envisioned myself as an ex-pat, or perhaps a cosmopolite, stuck in a foreign America.

I thought of romance languages, of changing my name, reinventing myself, faking my death. I thought about volumes in that dingy room, the complimentary stationery sole witness to the schizophrenic developments structuring themselves within my head. Soon, I had the world marked out on the whole pad—the unsharpened, stubbed pencil's graphite shattered across twenty pages or so.

In a dream, I kept on walking the same street I grew up on. It stretched on without end, each house mutating and morphing further and further until the landscape began to look like melted wax, with the accompaniment of a slow, garbled vinyl record that, upon further

listening, sounded like an old pop hit my grandparents used to listen to when they were still alive.

A car was speeding along, slowly, and in the dream I could see forwards and backwards and yet never thought of getting out of the way; I was a deer blinded by the headlights. When the car made the collision I remember both steel and flesh melting together in unholy union, disaster and victim inseparable.

The dream switched to a third-person view as I saw my corpse strewn about the torn metal and floating blood in slow-motion, like some kind of living sculpture. Sylvia, as it turns out, was the driver.

She seemed really shocked, yet had a clear and complete view of me, and it seemed like she was unable to slam the brakes. The doo-wop kept on playing, almost saccharine with its devotion, steadfast in its resistance to be anything else but completely sincere.

I woke up in a cold sweat, the motel-room clock reading *[4:36]* on the flickering LCD display. I rummaged around my coat pockets and found a bottle of sleep aids, and woke up a few hours later violently throwing up —evidently having taken too many pills. So in a sickly stupor I roamed about the town again, the alacrity of the grey sun like a panopticon whose invisible eyes were criticizing my every move. A slight surreality penetrated all things within and outside of my vision, as if there lay some subtle esoteric magic imbued within everything, as if everything was pagan and my cradle-Catholic faith had simply beguiled me into thinking in terms of pure monotheism.

I thought of myself either to be dead and still dreaming or alive and now hallucinating as old buildings, old people now young and fresh gushed forth from the spring of memories deceased, becoming as vivid and as visceral to me as blood on the virgin fleece of a lamb. The fashions of yesterday flew flagrantly in my face, their once-tattered cloth to be found in thrift-stores now seemingly newborn and straight off the rack.

In order to kill my hangover I headed for Louie's downtown, a newer joint the town had, only to see that its building was completely vacant. So I went back to the old haunt, and waved to the barmaid as I walked in.

"Hey Martha, how's the kid? Haven't seen you for a long time, not since . . . " I checked the wall-clock. "Well, about seven hours ago—give or take."

I tossed a few crumpled bills at the counter like shooting craps, but she only gave me a weird look. Come to think of it, she looked a hell of a lot younger than she did last night, too, but that was probably just the

meds talking. Mar signaled for Tony, another one of the bartenders, to come over. I could just make out their whispering—

"Tone, who the hell is this kid? You seen him before?"

He shook his head, both glancing sideways at me. "*Nah. Never."*

Tony came by.

"I'm gonna need to see some ID, bud," he growled like a dog who didn't recognize the postman.

I scoffed, annoyed they were acting like they never knew me before. I tossed over my card and Tony scrutinized it, squinting it over.

"Sorry kid," he slid it back, this time with a more sympathetic tone. "Ain't old enough yet. Come back on your birthday, alright? I'll fix you with a beer, then. On the house, ok?"

I stared at my license, and, sure enough, it *did,* in fact, say that I was twenty; the print said the next time I'd have to have it renewed would be March 17th, *2000*.

I looked at myself in the bar mirror, and saw a version of myself that was ten years younger—fresher in the face, with slight stubble and the feathery hair I championed when I was still an undergrad. The pieces were slowly coming to me in my druggy, hungover state of mind.

But there was just *one* more thing I had to check.

I held my breath at the door, checked my reflection, fixed my (now fluffy and voluminous hair), adjusted my clothes—if what I thought was going to happen was *actually* going to happen, then I could count this temporal displacement as a second chance to fix things, to make amends.

I knocked. Silence. Then, after a moment's pause, a smoker's rough-hewn voice replied, *"Coming!"* and hurried towards the door.

A lady, no older than forty-three, with a red crop of hair and a pair of heavily-bejeweled hands so rich you would've thought they were the property of the Vatican, paired with a faint distinction of European beauty, came outside to greet me.

"Hello," she smiled pleasantly. "How can I help you?"

All of these characteristics belonged to Mrs. Vermoth—now my *future* mother-in-law.

I introduced myself. "I'd like to see your daughter. We have some mutual friends, but I haven't had the pleasure of meeting her yet."

Her daughter, on account of her mother's call that *some cute boy wants to meet you*, came out in all the verdancy of her youth, fully restored in her twenty year-old self:

Sylvia's eyes had the glint of fiery passion subdued in a jade mischief,

her wit embodied in long, thin fingers which wrapped her hair like a cascade impatiently around themselves. She wore a polo underneath a cashmere sweater, a pair of jeans that hugged her lovingly and a dirtied pair of white sneakers, tied loose and lazily. Her red hair was like the branches of a weeping willow across her face. She extended her hand and smiled; her grin was something that was, with me, always something a little more than just friendly.

"Hi! Sylvia Vermoth. Pleased to meet ya."

Each marriage that started anew seemed fated to dissolve into the fog that lay at the edge of town against the brim of night, as Sylvia could never bring herself to stay with me more than ten years. We were never able to make it last.

How bad would it be to stay in this cycle? I thought to myself, *to* experience love at first sight over and over and over again, the climbing joy of realizing a relationship and the promise of everlasting happiness in the other?

It sounded wonderful.

But deep down I knew, even as I embarked on a thousand more decades, that this conceit could bear no fruit—it was a tree withered and devoid of its gifts. My love held no meaning, anymore, and I thirsted for a security that was only found in this false renewal—another try, another day, another divorce.

I looked into those fresh, green eyes that sparked with sweet delight until they became to me dull and listless, like marbles rolling anywhere without a cause, beholden only to the laws of gravity. I experienced nights in hell in cold, leaden beds if only because I knew that there would also be days of forgiveness and comfort. Yet every time I came to bear my sight into hers with the promise that I would love her forever I came to think it true less and less until the dregs of my affection were drained like a bottle of cheap champagne.

I went on one last date with Sylvia—our first—and this time I told her I only liked her as a friend, but I *did* know a guy whom she might be interested in, and maybe they would hit it off.

And I went back home and packed my things, and saw the world in a way I never had, living all thirty-two years of my life in the same town.

I went through the decade single for the most part—leaving a lot of time to myself, to God. I prayed a lot in those years and thought about joining the monastery, becoming a monk, the whole nine. But I found, just as well, that the religious life held no promise for me as a proper

vocation. So I learned another language, traveled across Europe, wrote a book, and eventually settled on a job as copywriter. It paid well, and my coworkers liked hearing my stories. I lived in the city, then.

There were still nights when I thought about her; John, the friend I introduced her to, and Sylvia had been married for about fifteen years now: their daughter's name was Henrietta; Annie's name had been my idea—my baby.

John and Sylvia seemed genuinely happy together, and I wished them the best, and Sylvia thanked me during the wedding speeches at the reception for introducing them to each other in the first place, and I could only give her the kind of smile that wept bitterly on the inside, my cries mercifully drowned in the laughter and applause from all the rest of the wedding guests.

Despite it all, and despite my yearnings, I knew that I did the right thing—I knew John was a much better man than I was, that he was a better match for Sylv. At the end of the day I found myself quite happy, knowing that Sylvia was going to be in good hands for the rest of her life.

I return to that old college town every now and then, still a regular at the usual haunt, and when I came back to the usual dive after all those years I ran down the story for a few sympathy beers—even the barmaid was bawling her eyes out, patting me on the back and telling me that I was a damn fine storyteller.

They were happy to have me, they said, and I responded that it felt good to be here, but I couldn't stay too long.

And for all the tears lingering at the bottom of my beer-mug, there were still a couple of happy ones.

If you really love someone, you gotta love what's best for them.

I drained my glass and went back to that old greasy spoon just for old-time's sake, and it was closed—only the empty husk of the building remained. I walked into another breakfast joint and ordered a steaming plate of biscuits and gravy, taking the last cigarette out of the pack and slowly enjoying the flavor And for once, I felt no sadness, for any man who's loved as much as I have can count himself the luckiest of them all.

I tapped the ashes of my cigarette into the dregs of my coffee-cup as I left, the grey flecks drifting about meaninglessly and happily like tea leaves.

peace

The smoldering embers of apocalypse burn softly in my eyes, the dregs of sin dripping from my cloven tongue, and in my soul I carry the weight of a thousand buried.

All the saints in heaven could not lift the single tear that lingers crystalline in my eye like a druid dreaming in sacred oak, my ears ringing with the cries of purgatory's bedchambers like church-organs—great bronze whispers whose voices I carry now within me, unrepentant that I once was, my lips that remained cold, never to kiss divinity by coal's pale fire.

The angels are crying. The martyrs are being massacred. I am shivering in a strange rain.

Today is a misty day, much foggier than the last, and these verdant pastures smothered green and licked by the dewfall move in divine plumes of fog blowing like drags from cheap cigars. I move concealed under black clouds; The Angel Of Death conspicuous in The Garden Of Eden, a blight, a smirk of plague upon rested planes and serene skies: a sight so beautiful it threatens to tear you apart and make you whole again.

The Devil has had too much of a hold on me, razing tender this flesh, instilling upon my weakness such carnal desires. Now the flames of heaven have immolated him whole—withered, he lay at my feet like palms at a king's entrance.

All around crowd poets and lovers, painters and seers, and I feel myself a newborn, cradled within the warm hearth of the earth's soil, moulded into the image of the Creator. I pull out vast and ponderous manuscripts, but before my sight they crumple, fading into obscurity.

I realize that this is purity, this is truth, that all things shall be forgotten in the end. All my work, eroded, by the indifferent sands of time. When my name is spoken for the last time I can finally rest.

The last breath shall be taken in the grave, on my lips the names of all the Muses I clung to like an icon of the Virgin Mary clutched against my breast.

Autumnal molt spreads its aging leaves into the tired air, sighs of nature making known her age throughout her deep forests and woody alcoves. Starry eyes fall headlong into love, uncertainty the caesura to everlasting passion.

I reside here in lower heaven, experiencing all the tribulations and joys of humanity, time's sweet erasure easing me into the buried calm of a sea that lurches violent one minute and serene the other. Doves scatter throughout the sky like Eucharists across the blood-red wine of the stilling sun melting into shimmering, crystalline seas. The sand has worn itself of its grit, becoming a powder-like cremation, grey beaches lying peaceful across never-ending horizons.

My soul bears a lightness never once known—a hint of the divine revealed to me, a dollop of honey placating this bitter tongue.

A second glance of quintessence blinds me, strikes me down in my human sight, yet reinvigorates me tenfold; I have seen light, know the totality of love, and these splinters that have pierced me are truly blessed.

I know not where I go, nor what I do, but harbor this feeling within that exacerbates my soul without reserve and agitates my lowly gaze, from the defenestration of the gutter towards the exultation of the throne of God.

The divine majesty of the Eternal King remains unchanged, and if only to be beholden to His name is perhaps the greatest thing to be in this life, to be forever preparing for the next.

All of that which I have written wilts against the unchanging Word.